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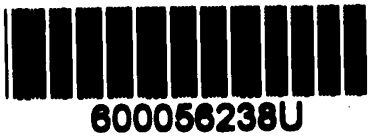
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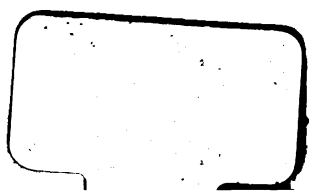

MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT.

A Novel.

'I shall be tutored to say "Yes" in time,—
The scarecrow, Sir, was married to the maypole
In time,—but, bless me! 'twas a tedious courtship!'

H. TAYLOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

MORTON'S HEIR.

Say, that one of you
Surmised this letter carried what might turn
To harm hereafter—cause him prejudice—
What would he do? *Luria.*

ANOTHER letter from Mr. Morton—a long letter. Mr. Morton was habitually taciturn, but, like many silent people, he made up for his reticence of speech by an amazing volubility of pen, and his lengthy epistles were the terror of his correspondents. Mr. Fielding glanced discontentedly at the closely written pages before him, and having

finished his breakfast, rather abstractedly, he bore it off to his study (the letter, I mean) as a dog carries off a bone, though not certainly with the same anticipation of enjoyment. Long practice had made him skilful in discerning at a glance what portions of his cousin's letters might be safely 'skipped,' and where lay the gist of the communication; and he read them as it were *per saltum*, filling up the lapses with a running commentary of his own.

'Temporising, as usual, Tom! trying to gain time, till my caprice—as you doubtless term it (I term it a foolery)—has passed away, or perhaps till I have passed away myself.' (Um—um—dying of course; he's always dying; pity he's so long about it.) 'I have always wished to make this young fellow my heir, but have been deterred by consideration for *your* natural expectations

(very considerate, he is, certainly); and it is a real pleasure to me that the attachment between these young people enables me to reconcile the claims both of kindred and of conscience (old ass!); though no one can deny my right to dispose as I choose of the fruits of my own industry (of his good luck he means; if *I* had ventured on any one of *his* hair-brained speculations I should have burnt my fingers to the bone). I mean to-morrow to have a clear understanding with Willoughby. If he is willing to come forward openly as Margaret's suitor, with my support (I should think he would be willing to do anything the old fool tells him to do), I shall send him down on Wednesday to Hartsknoll to ask the hand of your daughter—not as a penniless dependant, but as my *acknowledged heir*. I shall send with him, by way of credentials, my will, duly

signed and witnessed; and I flatter myself the rent-roll or settlements of *your* candidate, young Fernleigh, will look rather insignificant beside *that*! I need hardly say, that I shall take immediate steps to make the present position of your future son-in-law more worthy of the brilliant future I promise him. (The present position of my future son-in-law, thank Heaven, is that of a gentleman well born and well bred, which all *your* millions will never make of a Willoughby Evans, Mr. Morton!) I have named you sole executor. (Confound his impudence, I'll have nothing to do with "executing" any such imbecility!) Take care of Losada's portfolio; the filagree round the lock is a little loose (the filagree round your brain is!) and ——'

Here Mr. Fielding was interrupted by Margaret's entrance, in joyous spirits and glee.

'O, papa! Collingwood Fernleigh is coming home to-day!'

'Is he, my dear?' was her father's listless reply, without raising his eyes from the letter before him.

'And Helen has sent me a note, to say that if you can spare me she will call for me in the pony-chair, and drive me to the Park, this morning, and Mr. Fernleigh will bring me back to-morrow. She wants me to see Collingwood and Miss Marston, who will be there, too, this evening. Do you mind my leaving you for so long?'

Mr. Fielding looked up, absently, as if he scarcely understood her.

'Oh! yes; go, by all means; do just what you like, Margaret; I shall not miss you, for I have business that will occupy me all the evening. Say anything that is kind from me to the family at the Park.'

With this permission, Miss Fielding gaily departed to prepare for her visit. She had the liveliest curiosity to see the author of 'Galathea;' she had not yet outgrown her childish reverence for those who had spoken aloud to a listening world as historians, essayists, and, above all, poets; and to the interest in Collingwood, inspired by his intellectual gifts and classical attainments, was added the natural sympathy with Helen's unconcealed attachment for him, although she thought it a weakness in any woman to feel such extravagant devotion for any man, and a still greater weakness to avow it. But then Helen Grenfell, although a dear, kind, innocent little thing, was certainly not 'strong-minded,' nor in any way superior to the common failings of 'young ladyhood,' and might be forgiven

some extravagance in thinking and speaking of a youth who had distinguished himself as Collingwood Fernleigh had done. But when Helen duly appeared, to escort her friend to the Park, she seemed unusually reserved, and would say nothing about Colin, except that he would be with them by dinner-time, and had only 'run down' for a few days; and she did *so* wish Margaret to see him, and *so* hoped they would like one another.

'No fear of *my* not liking him; I like him already, for I know exactly the sort of person he is, and Caryl tells me that he is Miss Marston's idol.'

'They are both her idols, I think; but Colin is her godson. She reared him from a baby, for his mother died in giving him birth; and Colin is very fond of her too. She

has a great deal of influence over him, though he always treats her as a playfellow —(Margaret stared)—indeed, my uncle sometimes calls Queen Mab "Collingwood's *doll*."'

Miss Fielding felt rather bewildered at this. 'Queen Mab' might pass, but 'Collingwood's doll' was an odd expression to apply to a lady who resembled the majestic Lady Tolmaine, and who wrote historical sketches! She said:

'I cannot fancy the author of "Galathea" *playful*—a passionate melancholy is what——'

'Oh, please don't fancy anything about him! or you may feel disappointed if he does not resemble the image you have created of him; of course, Caryl is *your* ideal of perfection, and his brother is not a bit like him.'

'And why is it, "of course," that Caryl should be my ideal of perfection, pray?'

'Because you love him,' answered Helen simply.

'I do *not* love him, Helen, although I hope to do so, when affection has been prompted by judgment, not dictated by fancy.'

But at this stately speech, Helen looked puzzled and even distressed.

'I don't quite understand you, dear; I know that, for the present, your engagement to Car'l is not to be spoken of beyond our own family circle; still, you *are* engaged to him, and—and girls always think the men they are engaged to are *perfection*.'

'Do they?' answered Margaret, smiling, 'then I am not like all "girls," for I will not even take Mr. Fernleigh's perfection for granted until I have had longer experience of it. *You*, Helen, are a more orthodox believer in *your* lover.'

Helen blushed highly.

'Please don't call Colin my lover—oh! for gracious sake! He doesn't care for me—no more than Caryl does.'

Margaret readily accepted this disclaimer, for, thought she, an intellectual giant like Collingwood would scarcely choose such an unpretending little creature as Miss Grenfell for the queen of his affections—in which she showed her ignorance of such matters. But Helen looked grave for a long time. She did not like her friend's avowal that she did 'not love' Caryl Fernleigh. Helen was not very wise, nor at all clever, but she had the true instinct of a loving woman, that could frankly receive or repel a proffered affection, but could not accept it, as it were, under protest, or with cold distrustful analysis. But then Helen had not been educated by Lady Tolmaine in the cardinal point of belief that 'they were dangerous

guides, the feelings.' Yes, Margaret, they are dangerous guides, sometimes. But an undisciplined judgment, an immature experience can as surely, as fatally, mislead.

CHAPTER II.

COLLINGWOOD FERNLEIGH.

Methinks all poets should be gentle, fair,
And ever young, and ever beautiful.

A. SMITH.

THE precision of railway arrangements has the advantage of greatly shortening the period of expectant suspense. Margaret knew at what hour Collingwood Fernleigh would arrive, and retired to her own room, that she might be no intruder on the family reunion. She heard the 'trap' drive up to the door in which Caryl had driven to the station to meet his brother; but as her

window did not look upon the avenue, she could not indulge her curiosity by a sly peep from behind the curtain; so she was compelled to wait in philosophical patience until the sound of the dinner-bell should summon her downstairs. I will not take upon myself to affirm that Miss Fielding had less personal vanity than is natural to her sex; but she kept a stricter watch over it, and set it down as one of the feminine weaknesses against which it especially behoved her to guard. But, like other feminine weaknesses (or masculine weaknesses either, for that matter), it had a subtle power of self-disguise, and she never suspected its influence in the anxiety, of which she was conscious, that she should look better than usual to-day. It was not for Caryl that she braided her bright hair so carefully; trying first a white rose, then a pink one, and finally deciding that it

would look more 'classical' with no ornament in it at all. It was not for Caryl, for she knew, only too well, that in *his* eyes she could never look anything but most lovely, wear what she would. Yet she believed —as she drew her girdle just a *leetle* tighter round her slender waist, and contemplated the *waspish* effect with the undeniable complacency which most girls feel in the possession of that questionable charm—she believed that she was only desirous that Caryl's choice should be justified in the eyes of his poet brother, who was of course, as all poets are or ought to be, an enthusiastic amateur and true connoisseur of female beauty. She had been amusing herself all the afternoon in retouching her fancy portrait of the young author. A poet and a scholar! She felt a little awe-struck at the idea of being scrutinised by such a distinguished personage.

Not that he *would* scrutinise her. That pale pensive brow, with its hyacinthine curls would be raised a moment to greet her; those dark dreaming eyes would rest a moment on hers; but then the thoughtful face would resume its habitual expression of serious reverie. Were not all students contemplative?—all *true* poets serious, if not sad? That bell again—the second dinner-bell. She gave a last hurried look into the mirror, and tripped downstairs; but when she reached the drawing-room door she paused, with a feeling, very unusual in her, of bashful hesitation. She could have walked quietly in, to face with ladylike dignity and self-respect, a whole levée of 'august' strangers, though they had been royal dukes and princes; but an author, a poet, a classical scholar—*that* was solemn!

Meantime, the footman had been waiting

her arrival to announce dinner, and, perfectly indifferent to her frame of mind, he threw the door wide open for her at the very instant that the room—I might almost say the *house*—rang to such a peal of uproarious laughter as had never before greeted her astonished ears; and the shout, echoed in sheer sympathy by all the circle assembled in the room, had scarcely died away when Sir Loys came forward, and presented to her his youngest son—Mr. Collingwood Fernleigh. To her dying day Margaret never cordially forgave Collingwood the surprise, the revulsion—I had almost said the *shock*—of that introduction, little as he was to be blamed for the humiliation with which she acknowledged to herself that she had given her imagination unbridled license in trying to picture him to herself, and that portraits of Byron, Shelley, or Keats, will

not 'fit' the poets of the present day. And yet most women would have considered, that the lack of anything *ethereal* in Collingwood's appearance was amply compensated by more substantial advantages, and that he was beyond dispute a remarkably fine young man. In height he towered half a head above Caryl, and nearly a head and shoulders above Sir Loys; and the slighter symmetry of the elder brother's figure looked almost fragility beside Collingwood's giant muscle, breadth of shoulder, and depth of chest. His complexion was dark, even sallow, his hair black, and his features delicate and regular as Caryl's; the pure oval of his face, the softly dimpled chin, were such, that in the disguise of female attire he might have passed for a very handsome woman. But, oh ye gods and little fishes! what a bold one! For all these character-

istics, which sound so effeminate in description, could never make Collingwood effeminate-looking. His forehead was high and wide, and the delicately pencilled eyebrows, with the arch slightly raised on the outer verge, gave a playful expression to the dark eyes which were for ever sparkling restlessly round, seldom seeming to dwell upon any object, but flashing quick keen glances upon everybody and everything. There could be no greater contrast than between the rather indolent grace of Caryl's accustomed attitude and the uncontrollable vivacity, the overflowing vitality, that spoke in Collingwood's every gesture, and that made it as impossible for him to remain quiet a moment, as if he had been an armadillo. All these observations Margaret made at her leisure, during dinner, and made them quite at her ease, for the whole family was engrossed in

admiration of its idol, who received the homage quite as a matter of course, and took little notice of Miss Fielding, beyond occasionally darting at her one of those swift glances which she never met without a sense of involuntary irritation. Before dinner was over she felt a positive hostility to the new comer, who seemed so entirely indifferent to her silent criticism, and who jested and rattled, and talked rapidly and volubly, and with a singularly distinct and pure accentuation, although in a voice that had none of the soft musical inflection of Caryl's, and who laughed so loudly, and with such *abandon* of merriment that the very footman grinned behind his chair.

'Why is not godma' here?' he asked. 'Coming presently, is she? I was afraid Robert Browning might be ill, perhaps; though I don't think *that* would keep her

when she knew *I* was coming home. Miss Fielding, do you know my godma'?'

'Not yet,' answered Margaret, 'I am looking forward to that pleasure this evening; but what has Mr. Browning's illness to do with Miss Marston? Is she a relation of *that* poet?'

'Not that I know of,' laughed Collingwood; 'Robert Browning, the Robert Browning of Hartsknoll, is Queen Mab's cat.'

'Why does she give it such an odd name?' enquired Margaret, turning to Mrs. Grenfell, for she was beginning to resent young Fernleigh's levity.

'I haven't an idea!' answered Aunt Flo, piteously.

'Not yet?' asked Collingwood the irreverent. 'Why, Aunt Flo, have you not caught your idea all the time I have been away?'

'Oh, yes I have,' resumed Mrs. Grenfell, brightly, 'it's because Mabel is so fond of poets, and so fond of cats; and Robert Browning is her favourite poet, and so is the cat. I don't mean that the cat is a poet, of course, Colin—what an idea!' And Aunt Flo stopped breathlessly, while Caryl came to her relief.

'There is a standing quarrel between Colin and Miss Marston, Margaret, on the subject of Robert Browning the poet. My brother affects to despise him, and they dispute on the point every time they meet. Mabel delights so much in this controversy, that she gave her cat the name of her favourite author, merely as a constant opportunity of reviving it.'

'What will revive Aunt Flo? She is going to sleep.'

'The idea! You naughty boy, you want

us to go away, I suppose, that you may have all the conversation to yourself.'

He contrives *that* as it is, thought Margaret, as she followed Mrs. and Miss Grenfell into the drawing-room. There, the gentlemen had rejoined them, and the tea had been brought in, when a loud knocking was heard at the front door, which ceased abruptly as if (which was the case) the person who wielded the knocker had been standing on tip-toe to reach it, and had fallen suddenly backwards from exhaustion.

'It is Mabel!' cried Aunt Flo, 'coming after Collingwood. Hide! Colin, hide.' Whereupon, with a volley of sly grimaces, Colin concealed himself behind the window-curtain just as Mabel Marston flew into the room, wrapped in a scarlet cloak, and looking like little Red Riding Hood, or like a little robin-redbreast.

'Where's Colin? Where's my boy?' she cried, looking eagerly round the room, and without saluting anybody.

'Have you not met him?' answered Sir Loys demurely; 'you must have crossed each other in the wood.'

'Is he gone?' said the little lady, disconsolately, 'then I'll hurry back, I shall catch him, perhaps, before he reaches the Lodge.'

'Catch him,' laughed Helen, 'not if you had seven-leagued boots on, Mabel; come and have some tea.'

'No, no, I must go and look for my boy.'

Whereupon 'the boy' softly emerged from his concealment, and the Fairy Queen flew at him with a joyful cry, and Colin caught her up in his arms as if she had been a baby, and then followed such a rain of mutual caresses that Margaret was dumb with astonishment, but the others, who were

used to these demonstrations, only looked on and laughed.

This little outburst over, Miss Marston collected herself together, what there was of her, and greeted Margaret with an unceremonious cordiality that proved she accepted her at once as a member of the family circle. She threw off her cloak, and displayed her tiny form, arrayed in dark blue velvet, with a veil of black lace over her shining silver hair. And as she sat beneath the lamp-light, with the flush of joyful excitement on her delicate cheek, her wee white hands clasped on her lap, and her deep serious eyes raised fondly to her godson's face, Margaret thought her 'beautiful exceedingly' (though not a bit like Lady Tolmaine), and wondered what strange charm was this, that had outlived the rude touch of time and sorrow. Later, she knew

that it was the charm of a rarely gifted nature, that, with no selfish repinings for its own vanished youth, could fling itself with loving cordial sympathy into the youthful interest of others.

'How is Robert Browning, godma'?' there have been enquiries about him to-day which involved Aunt Flo in as great obscurity of "idea" as if she had been his namesake.'

'Robert is very well; I had a great mind to bring him with me, only he is so heavy.'

'He is so *very* heavy, is Browning,' said Collingwood, mischievously, but Mabel declined the challenge.

'My love for my pet, Margaret,' she said (I call all young girls by their Christian names), is a compliment to Colin, because it was *his* present. He brought it all the way from Paris for me when it was a kitten.'

'I suspect,' laughed Sir Loys, 'that he brought it no further than from a shop in the Seven Dials, where he got most of your pets—the canary, for instance, that Robert Browning ate.'

'He took it for a nightingale, I suppose,' said Margaret; 'did not poets—or singers, was it—once use to eat nightingales' tongues?'

'If Mr. Browning eats nightingales' tongues,' said Colin, with a laughing glance at Queen Mab, 'they must be *salted* ones. Never mind, godma', I'll bring you a real Syrian bul-bul next year, when I travel to the East.'

'An Assyrian bull?' cried Aunt Flo; 'is not that a dangerous pet, Colin?'

Later in the evening Sir Loys sat down beside his intended daughter-in-law, who had retired a little from the noisy group of which Collingwood was the centre.

'I hope,' he said, a little apologetically, 'that you are not shocked, Margaret, at the *sans façons* with which my boys treat their cousin? Young men are more familiar with their elders than was thought right in *my* time; but *you* probably are used to the present style, and find it quite natural?'

'I am so little used to young men at all,' answered Margaret, naïvely, 'that I do not know how they are expected to behave to ladies, old or young; but I am sure that both your sons are very fond of Miss Marston, however they may treat her.'

'They have every reason to be fond of her; she has been a mother to them. When their own mother died she roused herself from a recent personal sorrow to supply her place to them. She has been a mother to them in care and tenderness, a sister in loving sympathy. My eldest son owes his

life—more, possibly, than even his life—to her devotion to him during his long illness in Italy.'

'But Mr. Collingwood is her favourite, is he not?'

'Well, Colin is the pet of us all; perhaps because he has cost us so dear. I often say that Caryl is my dear wife's love-gift, but Colin is her *bequest*.'

'What are you saying about me?' called Miss Marston. 'I heard my name just now.'

'Only asking what your name really is,' said Margaret, smiling, 'you seem to have so many.'

'Queen Mab' is the name I gave her, said Collingwood, 'is it not an appropriate one?'

'*You* gave me, indeed!' retorted Mabel; 'it was mine long before you were born. When I was really a little fairy of eighteen, I was called Queen Mab.'

'Queen of Spells,' said Sir Loys.

'Queen of Trumps,' said the poet.

'Queen of Hearts,' said Caryl.

'*That* throne, at least, I have long abdicated,' replied Miss Marston; 'and, Car'l, you are guilty of treason if in *this* presence (smiling at Margaret) you can dare advance *my* claim to it.'

'There are Queens Dowager, you know, as well as Queens Regnant,' laughed Caryl.

And so the chatter and laughter went on round the fireside, and the warmth of that home affection sent a glow to the girl's heart, which had been chilled by a system of restraint and repression; and if Mr. Fielding could have seen her, as she fell asleep that night with a happy smile on her lips, he might have envied the gay indifference of nineteen to the gain or loss of 'millions.'

CHAPTER III.

CARYL IS THREATENED.

I fear the dread events that dog them both.
Coriolanus.

MORNING! Lo, 'King Frost' had suddenly commenced his reign, and every leaf and blade glittered with the crystals he had shaken from his diadem, while, with a wave of his silver sceptre, he had remorselessly blackened all Aunt Flo's heliotropes and scarlet salvias. Nay, even the crimson blooms of the late roses nodded on their stalks, like the gory head of the ghostly Fagan in Miss Joanna Baillie's ballad. The

sharp blast had brought down the leaves in showers, and the elms and beeches in their gorgeous robes stood like Eastern satraps on the many-hued carpets spread beneath their feet. Sir Loys' chesnut trees looked splendid to-day, with the sun gleaming through their arches as through a colonnade of gold; they might have formed a fit approach to Aladdin's jewelled palace.

Soon after breakfast Miss Marston, having substituted for what she called her 'court dress' a sober morning habit, departed for her own dwelling, escorted by her adored 'boy,' and as blithe and active as the little brown wrens that perked and rustled in the shrivelled hedgerows. But Miss Fielding stayed some hours later, and the October sun was low on the horizon when she and Caryl walked through the Coppice to the Manor House.

Mr. Fielding was at the door when they

came in, and as he welcomed his daughter with a smile, she did not observe—what did not escape the more sensitive Caryl—that his manner was slightly constrained and his expression a little anxious. She went to her own room, and left the two gentlemen together, when Mr. Fielding said:

'I will not ask you to stay and dine with us to-day, Fernleigh, because I am expecting Evans by the seven-train, and I have business to discuss with him. Besides, I am not quite up to the mark this evening. I have just received a telegram of bad news.'

'Only business news, I hope?'

'Why, no—my late partner, my poor friend and relative, Mr. Morton, was taken with a paralytic seizure this morning. He may be dead now. It was after Evans left; he will first hear of it on his arrival here.'

Caryl replied with some customary com-

monplace of sympathy and regret; but what chiefly impressed him was the disagreeable intelligence that his enemy and soidisant rival was on his way back to Hartsknoll. He was just about to take the hint to depart, when Mr. Fielding stopped him.

'One moment, Fernleigh, I have something else to say. Meredith was here half an hour ago, and I promised him that I would mention to you his wish.'

'Forgive me for interrupting you,' said Caryl coldly, almost sternly. 'I guess what you are about to ask, but it *cannot be*.'

'You are alluding to the foolish fellow's idea that he could get you to soften or to suppress your evidence against his scamp of a son? Of course *that* cannot be, but he does not ask that now. He only wants the loan of a sum of money to get the lad out of the country, and start him in America. This

has been,' he says, 'only one of the outrages too common between keepers and poachers, and you, who take no interest in sport, can stretch a point without inconsistency, for the sake of an old servant's only son.'

'It is true I am no sportsman,' replied young Fernleigh, 'but the law must be respected, and there is no protection for men who, like poor Parr, risk their lives in their employers' service, if they can be murdered with impunity by any ruffian who can shelter himself under his relatives' interest with those who, above all others, are pledged to the impartial administration of justice. I grieve from my soul for old Meredith; but I will not connive at the escape of a criminal, nor aid him by the help of a shilling.'

'Meredith seemed quite prepared to find *that* your decision; and he wishes me to

say ——' Here Mr. Fielding paused and hesitated, while Caryl bent his eyes on the floor, and his colour went and came as with some suppressed emotion,—'I hardly like to repeat what he *did* say. I would not have promised to do so but from the fear that he might choose a less discreet person if I refused. He was excited enough for anything.'

'Pray,' said Caryl, in a low voice, 'do not hesitate from a fear of wounding *me*; I am well used to any pain that can be inflicted from *that* quarter.'

'Well, then, he told me to say that if you declined to advance the money from kindness to *him*, you might do it for your *own* sake, to avoid allusions in open court to a painful subject that would be sure to transpire in the examination of witnesses, and so forth.'

Mr. Fernleigh looked up steadily into Fielding's face.

'I know; this was a *threat*, in short?'

'I thought, myself, it was something like it; but then I know nothing of the circumstances he alluded to. My dear young friend,' continued the merchant, paternally, 'forgive my intrusion where I have no right to trespass; but allow me to suggest that if this man has, as he implies, any secret of yours in his hands—if, by any youthful indiscretion or—or intemperance in act or speech, your reputation is at all in his power ——'

'That will do!' interrupted Caryl, almost fiercely. 'My reputation, thank God, is in no man's power. Meredith is wrong in believing that, if a sacrifice of principle such as he demands were possible, I would not make it a thousand times

rather for his sake than for my own. He thinks he can win, from selfish cowardice, a concession that is refused to pity, or, he will hint, to *remorse*. Once for all, he is mistaken, and his menace would have been wisely spared.'

He rose as he said this, as if to break off the conversation, and did not observe Margaret, who had entered during his last words, and stood irresolute whether to advance or retire; but a glance at her lover's face decided her to draw back, until he had quitted the room by the opposite door, when she came forward and addressed her father:

'Have you been quarrelling with Mr. Fernleigh, papa? I did not think he *could* look so stern and resolute.'

'No, Margaret, I have not been quarrelling with him, and I would not advise *you* to quarrel with him, either, if you care for

him; there are silken tunics that are lined with steel.'

'What has made him look so savage?'

'Some insolence of Meredith's; I wish I had not meddled with it. I think I'll follow him and try to sooth him; he is painfully excited. I'll go on to the station later and meet Evans.'

At that moment something fell from Margaret's hand, and rolled to her father's feet, who stooped to pick it up, while she uttered an exclamation of dismay.

'Caryl's precious ring! I might have lost it.'

'And what may you be doing with his ring?' enquired Mr. Fielding, examining the ornament, which was an old-fashioned 'hoop' of diamonds, of uncommon lustre and purity.

'It belonged to his mother,' said Margaret,

'and he wears it night and day. I asked him to let me try it on, because it seemed so large to have been a lady's.'

'It is too large for you, or you would not have dropped it.'

'Miles too large; but I believe Lady Fernleigh was a very tall woman.'

Mr. Fielding made no answer; he stood absently turning round the ring on his finger, where it fitted better than it had done on Margaret's. Suddenly, he turned away with a start.

'It is growing dusk; I shall not overtake Caryl before he turns off to the Old Chase.'

'Give him back the ring, papa,' Margaret called after him. 'I was coming down to return it to him.' But Mr. Fielding had left the room. 'And your gloves, you have forgotten your gloves,' she cried, running

after him; but he was fairly gone, and she returned to her own apartments.

She felt as if the twilight that now dimmed the landscape had fallen gray upon her own heart as well. Where was all the brightness of two hours ago? What could be bringing that odious Willoughby back so soon? Her father, too, why did he look so absent—so harassed? And as for Caryl, those flashing eyes, those compressed lips, that darkened brow, so unlike the calm thoughtfulness that his features had always hitherto expressed. In which of these expressions was his true character best revealed? Long she sat by her fireside, musing over this problem. Musing until the firelight sank low, and the twilight melted into the early moonlight that streamed into the room, and flung the tracery of the Virginian creeper round the window upon the floor. Then came the maid with message from the cook, 'Was she to

keep back dinner until the gentlemen came in? it was past seven o'clock.'

Margaret started from her reverie.

'So late? Light my lamp, Charlotte—of course we must keep dinner back. Mr. Evans cannot be here now until the nine train. I dare say your master has gone back with Mr. Fernleigh to the Park, to stop until it is due.'

'Meredith the keeper was here ten minutes ago, Miss. He says that he passed Mr. Evans in the wood, coming by the five train. He has been to the Park since, and Mr. Fernleigh was not there, nor Mr. Fielding either.'

'They have met in the wood, I daresay,' answered Margaret, carelessly, 'they will be here directly—give me my dress, Charlotte. I shall be late for dinner, for cook need not keep it back, since Mr. Evans has arrived.'

But there was no dinner eaten at the Manor House *that* night.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BEECHEN COPPICE.

He lies as if in dewy sleep he lay.
Awake him not, surely he takes his fill
Of deep and liquid rest,—forgetful of all ill.

SHELLEY.

THE Hartsknoll railway station was about two miles distant from the Manor House by the carriage road, but was within sight of the Lodge, on the skirts of the wood, where Meredith the gamekeeper lived. A path across some fields led from the station to the Lodge, and from thence through the wood to the kennels where Mr. Fielding

kept a few pointers and spaniels, more for the amusement of his guests than for his own, as he cared little for sport. Beyond the kennels the pathway continued straight from the station to the house, and traversing the shrubbery that surrounded the gardens, led on to the Old Chase, which was the boundary-line between the grounds of the Manor and Fernleigh Park. This path to the station was strictly reserved to Mr. Fielding's use, not even the servants being allowed to traverse it without leave, and the gate that opened from the wood was always kept locked, with a key which was only in Mr. or Miss Fielding's custody. Meredith also had orders to forbid any one from passing through the Lodge, or by way of the kennels into this sacred road, although these orders were occasionally transgressed when he or his wife were not on the spot

to enforce them. Midway, beside the private path from the station, there lay a declivity that sank down into a dell, formed by an ancient stone quarry, the sides of which were clothed from top to bottom with oaks and sycamores, among which was a close undergrowth of beeches, retaining, as young beeches do, throughout winter the withered foliage that in its freshness had adorned the summer, and which gave a promise of shelter and warmth in the bleakest time.

The Beechen Coppice in the spring had been a favourite resort of the village boys, because here they had always found the earliest primroses and the first thrushes' and blackbirds' nests. The blackberries ripened better here too, and wild raspberries grew there, and wild creatures abounded there, and the young hunters came for their prey. But Mr. Fielding's young pheasants

also liked the shelter of the beeches, and they did not like the boys who frequented it, whence the stringent prohibition of all wayfarers, the locked gate, and the menacing warder. The dell lay a little aside of the main path, but by descending into and crossing it, the Manor house could be reached a few minutes earlier, by the back-gardens and the servants' offices. But it was forbidden to the servants, and there was no temptation now to juvenile trespassers, no wild fruit or bird's eggs. So that the Beechen Coppice was very lonely and deserted; and on this night of October 29, 18—, it was very silent and still, though neither deserted nor lonely.

There are two men in the Beechen Coppice to-night. One lies stretched among the fern and brushwood, his face upturned to the sky. The other stands over him, gazing

down upon him intently. Perhaps he thinks that the form at his feet is sleeping? When the first murderer looked on the first dead, did Cain think that Abel slept? The face on which the October moonlight falls is calm indeed as if in slumber—but too pale—too pale! The dark eyes are wide open, dim and glazed. The body lies stark and rigid where it fell—no sign of any pang or struggle; but in the branches that wave above it, in the leaves that rustle round it, there is more of 'the subtle Spirit of Life,' than will ever stir *that* again. Dead! Dead in the prime of healthful manhood. The grass has not yet uprisen from the pressure of his buoyant footsteps, the bird has not yet come back that was frighted from its shelter by his tread. Yet, how still he lies! You may hear the faint slow crackle of the herbage creeping slowly up

beside him, in the deep eternal silence of those lips on which the smile has scarcely faded. But the other, the *living* man, who stands looking on him, almost as white and motionless, frozen with horror, pity, or—*remorse*?

He rouses himself, and stooping, lays his hand upon the heart, to feel for any faint lingering pulsation — feeling for it with hope or fear? But the heart is hushed, the form is already stiffening. Hurriedly glancing round, he stoops again, and takes from the grass, where it has been thrown, or has dropped, a portfolio or letter-case, studded and clasped with silver. He holds it a moment irresolutely in his hand, still gazing, not upon it, but upon the dead face that looks back no reproach. A light breeze rises, sweeps over the fern, and whispers through the shrivelled foliage,

like a shuddering sigh, and a scarlet leaf of maple flutters down from the tree above, and lies, like a flake of blood, on the wan lips. By one of those inconsequent impulses that sometimes stir men in moments of deep excitement, the living bends forward and softly, even reverently, brushes the leaf away. And then he glides back into the woodpath, leaving the still face ever upturned to the white moonlight, staring down upon it with the cold unsympathising wonder with which all Nature seems to look upon the strange sad mystery of death.

CHAPTER V.

WHO? AND WHY?

Though it was strange how, even when most secure
In our domestic peace, a certain dim
And flitting shade could sadden all.'

Paracelsus.

A FEW days later Miss Marston sat at her cottage window, looking out for a visitor from the Park, and presently Collingwood's tall figure was seen striding along the moss green vista that stretched out beyond the little wicket-gate into the wood. Queen Mab was in her purple to-day, as Collingwood termed her more serious moods; and as he infinitely preferred a playmate to a

mentor, he would not have chosen this time to visit her, but that he knew a deeper gloom brooded over the Park and the Manor House than any he would find at the cottage. Indeed, throughout the neighbourhood, 'all faces gathered blackness' to-day, and no wonder—a murder had been committed, almost on the very threshold of a respected and 'respectable' home; and although the victim was a stranger to most of the Hartsknoll people, his youth, and the improbability that he could in any way have provoked the assault, added to the pitying interest with which an event in itself so exciting was discussed by every one. The sadness which always lurked in the depths of Mabel's clear blue eyes now looked forth from them unreservedly, and the playful dimple having vanished from around her mouth, had left visible the graver lines that

sorrow long ago had channelled there, when smiles had been rarer visitants than tears. She went out and opened the door for Collingwood in silence, and then gliding past him back into the parlour, took her accustomed seat by the fireside, looking wistfully into his face, while Colin threw himself on the sofa, and pinched Robert Browning's tail, by way of bringing the cat's feelings into unison with his own. Miss Marston spoke first.

'It's over, Colin?'

'If you mean the inquest, yes it's over; and it's all come to nothing.'

'You mean that they have discovered nothing?'

'Of course,' answered Collingwood, pettishly (he always vented his dejections in pettishness), 'how stupid you are to-day, godma'!' and how stupid all those coroner's

people were! I never saw such a muddle-headed pack! Here has been a man murdered at our very doors, and no chance at all, it seems, that the ruffian who did it will ever be guessed at. A murder will come (as the Irish say) to be a natural death among us soon, if things go on in this way.'

'But Colin,' said Miss Marston anxiously, 'tell me all about the enquiry.'

'You will see it all in the newspaper to-morrow morning, and perhaps one or two more to match it.'

'I don't want to see it in the paper; I want to hear it all from you now, this moment. Of course Mr. Fielding was a chief witness?'

'Yes; his evidence was that he went to the station about a telegram that he wished to send to town, and that on giving the porter a message for Evans, whom he ex-

pected by a later train, he was told that the clerk had arrived an hour before, and must long since have reached the Manor House. Whereupon, Fielding set off, taking a short cut leading through the Beechen Coppice, and came upon the poor fellow, lying stiff and stark, and as dead as a door-nail.'

'Dead. But was he proved to have been murdered?'

'His death had resulted from a blow scientifically administered behind the ear. He had been struck from behind, and death must have been instantaneous. The weapon has not been found, but seems to have been a bludgeon, or what is queerly called a "life *preserver*."'

'What witnesses besides Mr. Fielding?'

'Old Meredith proved that he had met him at the entrance to the wood, and had gone with him a few yards, to put him in

the way to the Coppice, after which he had turned back to the lodge, for some rat-traps he had promised the housekeeper at the Manor House, whither he went shortly afterwards by the road, and so missed finding the body. The assault must have been committed a few minutes after they parted.'

'What motive has been suggested for the crime—robbery?'

'No robbery has been proved. He had on a watch and gold chain, and a purse containing some silver; but there might have been more upon him when he was killed. The woman at his lodgings proved that the night before he started he told her that he carried down to Hartsknoll with him the worth of a Duke's estate; but she took little notice of the vaunt, as he was given to boasting and chaffing; and she thought, from his high spirits, that he had been drinking.'

Miss Marston pondered a little, and then asked:

'What is the general opinion on the subject?'

'It is believed that he was struck down in the dusk by mistake for some one else—probably for Caryl.'

Mabel turned pale.

'For Caryl? Who would seek to harm *him*?'

'There's Meredith. I don't mean the old fellow, of course. He (naturally) is not fond of Car'l, but he is a good creature, barring his beastly temper, and would not raise his hand against our father's son. But that ruffianly lad of his is about still, and is even suspected to be lurking somewhere in this neighbourhood. It is thought that he took Evans in the dusk for Caryl, and rid himself of the witness against him in poor

Parr's affair, by much the same means. Practice makes perfect.'

'Did you ever see this Willoughby Evans?'

'Never; till I saw him dead to-day.'

'Was he like our Caryl in dress, height, or figure?'

'No more than you are. It is difficult to judge of a man's form when you have never seen it in life and motion. But I should say he was half a head taller than my brother, and a great deal more heavily built. He was more like Fielding in these points, and resembled him in his dress, which he seems to have copied, as these subalterns like to ape their superiors. He had on a light gray overcoat, and a Glengarry cap with blue ribbons, like that Fielding sometimes wears, they tell me.'

'And you think he was mistaken for Mr. Fielding? But ——'

'I think nothing of the kind, godma'.'

'Then what *do* you think? Don't be tiresome, Colin.'

'I will tell you. This Evans had visited Morton, the millionaire, cousin of Mr. Fielding, the night before his death. He had probably received a handsome present from him at parting. He seems to have been a vulgar, talkative fellow, very much elated by the possession of what must have seemed to him quite a fortune, and which he probably carried on his person, as it has not been heard of since. Now, the train by which he came here stopped an hour at the Merthyr Junction, where there are often some rough-and-ready customers from the colliery and mining districts lounging about.

If Evans indulged (as he might have done if he happened to meet any acquaintance at the station) in boasting, as he did to his landlady, he might have been overheard by some desperado, who thought it worth his while to follow and rob him. It is market-day at Kinton, and in the confusion there always is at such seasons, with the farmers' servants and their baskets and packages, a stranger could easily pass unnoticed by clerks and porters, even in quiet Hartsknoll.'

'But, Colin, did any suspicion point to old Meredith, since *he* was the last person known to have been with the unhappy man?'

'*Old* Meredith is all right; his evidence was quite voluntary and straightforward. His statement was confirmed by the servants at the Manor House, to whom he took the

vermin traps after he had left Evans in the wood. There is no suspicion attached to *him*.'

'Mr. Morton can prove that he gave Evans money when he left him.'

'Mr. Morton is past proving anything; he was seized with paralysis an hour or two after Evans quitted him. He is still speechless, and is not expected to survive the stroke.'

'So, perhaps, this crime, like many others of its class, in spite of the saying that "murder will out," is destined never to be revealed until the Judgment Day.'

'Just so,' answered Collingwood; and rising with a yawn, he began to indemnify himself for his long quiescence by striding up and down the room. 'I believe that you women look forward with positive satisfaction to the Judgment Day as to a magnificent feast of scandal, and that each of you

hopes that her own particular share in the disagreeable publicity of the transaction will be overlooked among the more "sensational" delinquencies of her acquaintance. I say, Mab, what a *muff* that father-in-law of Caryl's is!'

Colin's colloquial diction, it will be observed, was rather emphatic than elegant.

'Is he? I don't know him; but Sir Loys and your brother think him a man of average ability.'

'They will not think so, since they have seen his behaviour at the inquest. You never saw a fellow so scared; he whimpered and whined, and got so confused he could not even remember at what hour he came upon the body, nor how long he was finding his way home to give the alarm. He seemed quite to have lost his head, in fact.'

'I do not think the worse of him for that; he had known the poor young man from a

boy; it must have been a terrible shock to him.'

'No shock would have scared away his wits if he had had any worth keeping.'

'Some people have feeling as well as wits.'

'Now don't fly at me, dear old pet,' said Colin, in the fond caressing tone that always *did* make a fool of Mabel, 'because I say that Fielding *is* a muff to let his feelings, if you choose to call them so, overpower him to such an extent that he can give no assistance to those whose duty it is to unravel this mystery. Why, there's my brother, who has such a horror of death that he shrinks and sickens at the sight of a dying animal, and pines and mopes for days over the "Origin of Evil," or some such pellucid metaphysics; if a woman weeps before him over her baby in teething fits;

but *he* never allows his sensibility to enfeeble him in action. Witness his spirited conduct in that affair with young Meredith; and, with the horror of the poor murdered wretch before his eyes, he was as calm and firm as *I* am, trying to reassure that trembling Fielding, though you and I know what the effort must have cost him.'

'And what it will yet cost him, I fear,' sighed Miss Marston, 'when the reaction comes; but when does Car'l ever shrink from suffering himself when he can lighten it to others by bearing it? You left him at the Manor House?'

'I left him and my father there. He told me to say to you that when he had seen our governor home he would return to spend a few moments with you.'

'And, Miss Fielding, where was she?'

'She was there—in her own apartments,

of course. Aunt Flo had sent the carriage with Helen to bring her up to the Park, directly she heard of the sad affair. But Miss Margaret declined to leave her father. She is one of the "strong-minded" ones, I believe, and scorned to show the white feather.'

Miss Marston blazed up instantly in defence of her favourite's favourite.

'She is a very graceful intelligent girl, and very pretty too, and so you'd think if she was in love with *you*.'

'She's too bumptious for my taste. I hate those "intellectual" women—critical, analytical, and all that, with their broad white brows like a Herefordshire cow's. I declare I'm rhyming!—the lyrical faculty in me is becoming *too* predominant. I am like Southey's Enchantress—

Still her speech was song.'

'Colin, don't be ridiculous.'

'Stop. I recant; they are like nothing so useful and motherly as kine, they rather remind me of the plaster heads at a phrenologist's, all the "organs" fully developed, and duly mapped out, "causality," "self-esteem," &c. Not the sort of head a man would choose to nestle on his shoulder or lie upon his pillow.'

'For such soft uses you would prefer an emptier head? Your taste in beauty reminds me of Georgie's, who, when Caryl once took a fancy to sport a beard and moustaches, said, that *she* admired "a *vacant* face."'

'And instanced *mine*!' said Collingwood, with a laugh. 'Well, *chére amie*, I must leave you; just as you are getting sprightly, too, for Car'l will be here directly, and then you will relapse into your dismals. By the

way pet, Aunt Flo told me—as a great secret, of course—that Margaret will inherit all Morton's wealth, to the tune of a million or more. What luck for Caryl! A fortune like that, will rebuild Fernleigh, and drain lands, and rebuild cottages, and endow school and church, and pay all my debts! How jolly!'

'I would not count upon that last item if I were you; Mr. Fielding might demur to *that* employment of his daughter's fortune, if Caryl did not. You must marry an heiress yourself, to do that.'

'Oh, you mercenary little wretch! where am I to find an heiress?'

'There's Helen Grenfell. Not such an heiress as Margaret will be, certainly; but quite rich enough for such a spendthrift as you.'

'And quite ugly enough too,' replied Colin

uncivilly. 'I suppose any little dowdy will do for a younger brother. I am off, for here comes Caryl, looking as if he had swallowed the American's "bottled thunder," and forgotten the *cork*!'

'Go and let him in, then, for Georgie is off to the village, to gossip and groan among her compeers there; and mind you shut the gate behind you.'

CHAPTER VI.

A DARK HOUR.

Oh, Thou that walkest on those waves! forgive the faithless fear
That, shrinking from the gathering gloom, no longer feels Thee near.
Deeper the threatening shadows roll over the sunless sea,—
Yet, Lord, Thou hast not left my soul, for still she trusts in Thee!'

COLLINGWOOD admitted his brother, as the lady of the house had directed, and then made his escape, while Caryl went into the little parlour, looking indeed as grave and sad as if he had just come from the funeral of his dearest friend. He did not even speak to Miss Marston as he entered, but seated

himself by the table, and laid his head upon his folded arms, in an attitude of weary despondency, while she, not quite unused to these manifestations, kept a sorrowful silence. At last he looked up.

'By what fatality is it,' he said, 'that I am ever pursued by images of pain and horror that have for me above all other men so peculiar and frightful a significance? Why is it that the sunshine of hope and love, that falls unclouded on the path of other men, must still fling the dread shadow of death on mine?'

'Not on *your* path has it fallen, my dearest,' replied Mabel, gently; 'thank God for that—that this misery, piteous as it is, brings no desolation into any home of ours.'

'Can you offer that as comfort to *me*?' said Caryl reproachfully. 'When have I been able to fold myself in the warm mantle of

mere personal enjoyment, and look forth with indifference on those who perish with cold around me? When has the cricket chirp of a selfish content drowned to my ear the wail of a world's suffering, the universal vain appeal against violence and wrong? If the love of God seems estranged from the meanest of his creatures, is it not still to seek for me? The love of God! it evades, it recedes from me; it is the meteor that plays amid the corruption of the grave, and is quenched in that impenetrable gloom.'

'Not impenetrable, Caryl, since Christ has risen.'

'But,' he murmured, 'if Christ be not risen ——'

'Oh, Caryl, my dearest, does your faith fail *there*? I had thought you untainted by the cold reasonings, the colder criticisms of the unbelievers of our day.'

'Nor have I any sympathy with those men,' answered Fernleigh, 'as they can have none with me. How could they so calmly set themselves to chisel and chip away the rock on which I, and thousands like me, are standing, if they could see, as we do, the fathomless abyss of desolation and despair that yawns beneath it? What sympathy can I have with men who complacently take to pieces their puny model of the ship, to demonstrate its unseaworthiness, while on the beach beneath their windows the ship itself is labouring in the tempest, amid the crash of spars, the roar of breakers, the cry of despairing, perishing souls? For,' he added in a lower voice, 'the ship is toiling in the waters, but He is asleep on a pillow.'

'Asleep,' she said, 'or seeming so, yet He is there, or the ship would long since have foundered.'

'You know, Mabel,' he resumed, 'that I have but one wish, one aim, one prayer—to behold God on the Mercy Seat; that there is no revelation of Him possible or conceivable to my soul but the revelation of Him as Love. Love that embraces his entire creation, from the archangel before His throne to the midge in the sunbeam, leaving no wrong unredressed, no pang uncompensated to the weakest and meanest of His creatures;—that if the cry of one such make a discord in the hymn of His glory, He may be a God Infinite in Wisdom as in Power, but He is not an Infinitely *Loving* God, and so, no God to *me*!'

'That such is your spiritual need, I know,' she answered, 'and I doubt not that it will be satisfied—"in our Father's house is bread enough and to spare;" yet, Caryl, surely an attitude of more humility befits one who

asks for the highest grace. The intellect may aspire, the heart must kneel. God bids us look up to behold His power and glory, but He bends down to us to reveal His love. To faith alone can be granted what faith alone can apprehend. The child may cling to its mother's hand in the darkness, and sleep confidingly in her nearness and protection, but only in the dawn of daylight it may look upon her face. Is *any* sense of love possible without *trust*? Dare you aspire to know something of the Highest Love, and yet hesitate to approach it under the conditions that are demanded of you by the least and lowest? Why, the very animals might teach you a truer lesson! They know your *power* to harm or destroy them, but they confide in your will to help them. Will you put less trust in your Creator than your very *dog* reposes in you?'

'But this mystery of death and pain,' he sighed, 'meeting me at every turn, mocking my brightest moments like the flower-crowned skeleton at Egyptian feasts. To others this familiar presence grows indifferent, but it never loses its horror to me.'

'To the young,' answered his friend, 'this veiled skeleton wears indeed an aspect of indefinite horror, but sometimes—to some—there comes a day when the formless features assume the familiar semblance of one whose place is vacant in our heart and home, and *then*, Caryl, the dread softens into reverence, the horror into a holy sadness, a holier hope. My child, believe me, I speak of what I *know*. When love bends to look into the sepulchre, the light she sees there is not *within*, but *beyond* it; not the meteor gleam of corruption, but the rising of the "Bright and Morning Star."'

was over, Fielding recovered himself, and we left him tolerably composed.'

'And Margaret?'

'I did not see her—she has even declined to see Helen or Aunt Flo; but her father assured me that although greatly distressed, as is natural, she was not ill.'

''Poor girl, it must have been a dreadful shock to her; she ought to be taken away from here, at least until the talk has died away. Change of scene will be absolutely necessary for her.'

'So Sir Loys told her father, but he negatived that suggestion at once. He said it was impossible for him to leave Hartsknoll at present, though he did not explain what imperious necessity it was that detained him.'

'Caryl, my darling, will you trust your Margaret with me?'

He looked at her, and his eyes brightened joyfully.

'With you? Oh, how gladly! but, Mabel, will it be change enough for her to come no further off than here?'

'Listen to me. I have had a letter from my dear friend M. Dunois in Paris. He has lighted on an old MS. which would be of the greatest use to me in completing the new edition of my "Courts." But it is of great value, and the owner declines to part with it, although he would allow me free access to it if I were on the spot. Now, what if I visit Paris for a few weeks, and take Margaret with me? And Helen, too, if Sir Loys will spare her. That will put quite a new set of ideas into her head, for she has seen as yet very little of society, and she has a special ambition to mingle in "literary" society. Would you be jealous

of the Parisians, Caryl, and afraid to trust her so far?'

Fernleigh laughed.

'I am sure my interests would be safe in the hands of our Queen of Spells; but oh! Mabel, how kind and thoughtful of you to propose this.'

'I have a selfish motive. I wish for an opportunity of studying that young girl's character. Something in her face tells me that it is well worth studying; and if you are very good, my son, you may follow us to Paris, and show the girls the lions, when I am too busy or too cross? Is it settled?'

'If Mr. Fielding makes no objection.'

'If he does you must contrive to overrule it; that is your office, and I will coax your father to lend us little Helen. Oh, Car'l, my dear boy! shall not we (as Colin says) be "*jolly?*"'

CHAPTER VII.

NOT DEAD YET.

For see, though nothing's surely known as yet,
Still, truth must out. I apprehend the worst.

Luria.

We are in Mr. Morton's sick chamber again, for the millionaire is not dead yet. He has recovered from the paralytic attack that had prostrated him at the time of Evans' murder, five months ago, and does not look much worse than he did then, except from a deeper tinge of yellowness in his cheek, and a slight contraction of the muscles on one side of his face, that gives him rather a

sinister expression, as he watches the handsome features of his cousin Fielding, who sits with him to-night, as on the evening on which he was first presented to you. But Mr. Fielding has aged very much in that short time. His face wears a worn, haggard look, that tells of bodily ill-health, or mental uneasiness, or perhaps both. And his cousin's society will not do him much good, for Morton, since his last attack, has grown very obstinate and fretful.

Mr. Fielding is speaking.

'I have nothing more to say on the subject, Morton. If I pretended to be totally indifferent about it, you would not believe me, I daresay; but indeed, except for Margaret's sake, I don't care how great a fool you make of yourself, either before your death or after.'

'It is you who have made a fool of your-

self,' retorted his cousin, 'in trying to make one of me. You thought you had it all your own way, while I was lying here speechless, given up by all the doctors, and that poor young fellow knocked on the head like a bullock in your dismal out-of-the-way place. But you have reckoned without your host. Evans is dead, and there's an end; and your daughter may choose any husband she likes, for me. But my wishes shall be respected for all that, and you will reap no benefit from your temporising trickery with me. Produce the letter-case you purloined from the poor fellow—before he was well cold, may be; or not a shilling of mine shall you or your dainty son-in-law ever inherit.'

'You cannot prove that he had that cursed letter-case about him.'

'Oh! my good friend, my memory is not failing me, I assure you. The night before his death—only a few hours before my sudden illness—I was as clear-headed as I am now——' ('and as pig-headed,' thought his cousin). 'He assured me that but for your influence he was certain that Margaret would prefer him to young Fernleigh; and he read me a passage or two from letters he had formerly received from her, which rather confirmed that statement.'

'He improvised them, probably,' said Fielding.

'When we parted I gave him that portfolio, containing my will properly signed and executed, and naming him as my heir. It has never been heard of since; and who had any interest in making away with it except you?'

'You may as well add who but I had any

interest in making away with the man himself, and charge me at once with murdering him.'

'Well, *somebody* has murdered him; and whoever did does not seem to have got more by it than a paper that was of no value to anybody but *you*.'

Now, Mr. Fielding was possessed of a calm and equable temper, but there are provocations which would strike fire from the eyes of a dove. *His* eyes flashed at this speech of the peevish invalid's, and then rolled fearfully, as if the mutual disaccord that had long existed between those inharmonious orbs had at length reached a climax, and was about to result in the permanent divorce of a squint. But they thought better of it.

'I wish you good evening, Mr. Morton. I can make some allowance for the petulance

of a valetudinarian, and some for the purse-proud insolence of a millionaire. But neither the one nor the other can excuse the atrocious implication conveyed in your last words.' So saying, he rose, and taking his hat, moved to the door, while Morton watched him with a sardonic grin, or what looked so on his poor wry mouth.

'Come Fielding,' he said, 'don't go off in such a tiff. I never meant *that*; come back, and let us talk the matter over in a friendly spirit.'

His placable visitor complied, and sat down again, saying:

'This is probably the last time we shall ever meet; I don't wish to part in anger. Tell me openly of what you *do* suspect me, and whether I can do anything to remove your suspicions; you always *were* distrustful of your best friends.'

'I suspect you of a double robbery of the dead—of Evans, whom you knew to be dead; and of me whom you believed to be so.'

'Anything more? Your remarks are certainly most friendly.'

'However the young man came by his death, the body was taken to your house; and you had there every opportunity of rifling it of the papers you knew he had about him. You might have thought it probable that I had perished some hours before him, in which case he died my heir, and my wealth was lost to you and yours. And you took advantage of your private information to destroy the evidence of this fact.'

'Well, if I destroyed it I cannot restore it; so why do you bother about it? and why punish poor Margaret, who certainly is in no way to blame?'

'I punish *you* through your daughter, and

possibly your son-in-law too; who, for all I know, may have been your accomplice.'

Mr. Fielding uttered a dreary laugh. The idea of the delicate high-minded Caryl Fernleigh being an 'accomplice' in the suppression of a will!

'And now,' he said, 'what do you ask of me?—for my child's sake alone I submit to your offensive caprice.'

'I ask you to produce that paper, and I will forgive you; cancelling the will I have since made, leaving my every farthing to hospitals and sisterhoods,—and I will make your daughter my sole heiress.'

'But if I have destroyed it?'

'You have not, probably, destroyed Losada's valuable portfolio as well? Produce *that*.'

'I cannot.'

'Give me your word of honour that you have destroyed both, and confess under

what circumstances you did so. I will be satisfied with inflicting on you *that* humiliation?'

Mr. Fielding hesitated; the temptation was strong, but he resisted it, for 'between you and me,' reader, he knew no more than you do what had become of the missing document, and there was always the chance of its reappearance, to convict him of having committed himself to an ungentlemanly falsehood.

'No,' he replied at last, 'I have not destroyed it, nor have I ever seen it in my house.'

'Oh, very well,' said his cousin, coldly, 'have your own way; I will give you one chance yet. How is it, that although this letter-case was known to be on Evans' person, that no means were taken to regain it after his death?'

'Only I knew anything about the existence of such a portfolio; and I considered it of no importance, as its contents were rendere d of course, null by *your* having survived the young man.'

'Yet, I have been told that a suspicion of his carrying something of value about him was the inducement to the crime?'

'That was Collingwood Fernleigh's suggestion, but it is not the prevailing opinion. It is believed that he was struck down by some one, probably young Meredith, who mistook him for Caryl, against whom he had a grudge.'

'That is my belief also. Has anything been heard of young Meredith since?'

'Nothing; he is supposed to be in hiding somewhere in Liverpool.'

'And you still retain his father in your service?'

'Why not? Poor fellow, it is not his fault that he has a blackguard son, and the Fernleigh family have a great kindness for him; but what is this chance you offer to give me yet?'

'I will to-morrow insert advertisements in all the papers, and cause bills to be posted in all directions, offering a reward of 50*l.* for any information about my lost portfolio, and 100*l.* for its restoration.'

Mr. Fielding changed colour.

'Good heavens, Morton, you must be careful, or your enquiry may take a turn that would be extremely annoying to me. I do not wish Margaret's name to be mixed up in this affair, as of course it will be if the contents of that ridiculous document should transpire.'

'I cannot help that; if you will do underhand things you must expect to suffer.'

'No one but yourself would suspect me of doing underhand things.'

'No one but myself knows you so well. You never in your life would face any difficulty, if there was a possibility of creeping past it.'

'I have had enough of your insults for the present,' said Fielding sullenly, 'it will not be my fault if I expose myself to them again.'

'Sit down, Tom; I want to hear about Margaret. I have no quarrel with *her*.'

The merchant hesitated, but the old temporising instinct prevailed. Morton's tone was softened when he asked after his god-daughter. He might relent in her favour after all.

'Margaret is well and happy, but I have not seen her for these three months. She has been spending the winter in Paris. A

friend of hers at Hartsknoll was so kind as to chaperone her there, thinking that the change would do her good. That sad affair was very trying for her, poor girl.'

'I suppose so, though from what Evans said of her I should think she had not much sensibility.'

'D—n Evans!' cried Fielding fiercely. 'What are you always bringing him up for? I wish I had never heard the fellow's name.'

'I suppose,' resumed Morton, without noticing this outburst—'I suppose young Fernleigh is in Paris too?'

'He has been there; they are all coming back next week, and I am glad of it. We old people want some young life among us.'

'You will have gained your whim when your daughter marries the heir of Fernleigh. The family off-shoot will be regrafted into

the parent stem; and I don't see that it was worth the pains you have been at to manage it. I hope, at least, that the son-in-law of your choice has not been deceived by the promise of more money than my pretty god-daughter is ever likely to possess.'

'The son-in-law of *my* choice,' retorted his cousin angrily, 'is not influenced by the desire of gain, which was so powerful with *your* favourite.'

'Is he not? However, if he is not a fool, he cannot be quite indifferent to the loss or gain of an inheritance that would repair *his* fortunes, which report says would be rather better for a patch or two.'

'An inheritance! Why, Morton, after all you are not dead yet.'

'No!' repeated the millionaire, slowly, with a sly smile—'no, certainly I am *not* dead—*yet*.'

CHAPTER VIII.

HELEN AND MARGARET.

Sweet days befall them, and good loves and lords,
And tender and temperate honours of the hearth.

Atalanta in Calydon.

QUEEN MAB'S device for the restoration of her young friend's health and spirits was a complete success. The change of scene dissipated the gloomy associations which would otherwise have settled around beautiful Hartsknoll, and saddened it to Margaret and Caryl for ever. The horror faded fast, and was soon comparatively forgotten amid the excitement of a town and foreign life,

and in the intellectual brilliancy of such society as Margaret had hitherto only read or dreamed of. Indeed, those three months in Paris always afterwards seemed to her like the remembrance of a sparkling dream. The mornings spent in visiting the world-renowned monuments of art, with friends who could not only sympathise with her admiration of them, but who were competent to direct and guide it; the evenings passed either in the select circle of Miss Marston's intimates, listening to conversation, sometimes learned, often brilliant and eloquent, and always pleasing and instructive; or, more rarely amid the glittering scenes of fashion and gaiety, and, what she loved best of all, in the tender familiarity of domestic retirement, when doors were closed against all intruders, and the three young people gathered round their elder friend to

listen to words rich in serious thought and feeling, yet ever illumined by the caressing playfulness, the almost frolic grace, which was still Mabel Marston's most winning charm—the spell by which she held captive the hearts of her young disciples. Her conquest of Margaret was sudden and complete. The young girl yielded a ready submission to a moral and mental superiority that *proved* but never *asserted* itself. Lady Tolmaine's wisdom had chilled and repelled by its severity, but Mabel's attracted by a sweet feminine grace, whose charm was felt but could not be analysed. Even the weaknesses of age and sex, that sat grimly on Lady Tolmaine as a crown of thorns, were worn lightly by Mabel, as a wreath of flowers. Miss Fielding soon sympathised in the adoration of Helen and Caryl for her, and which, Helen said, Collingwood fully

shared, though he had a way of his own of showing it. For Helen her friendship was far less enthusiastic. She could not but like the innocent gentle girl, whose appreciation of others was so frank and cordial, so unselfish in its humility and reverence. She was pleased, too, with Miss Grenfell's devotion to herself, a devotion to which she had been quite unaccustomed, as her grandmother's 'system' of education had forbidden her any girlish intimacies. Still, in her proud idolatry of *mind*, she rather despised poor little Helen's avowal of inferiority, and felt sometimes impatient, and even a little ashamed, of the ignorant homage paid her by a believer who 'worshipped she knew not what.' She had, too, an unacknowledged jealousy of the lofty pinnacle on which Helen always placed Collingwood's image above his brother's; of her assumption that

his right to this eminence could never be disputed by any one. Caryl, of course, was a dear fellow—good and gifted, as Margaret's lover should be. But Collingwood! the scholar, the poet!—it was honour enough for any woman to be permitted to sigh out her soul in love for *him*; but where was the woman worthy to aspire to *his* love? And Margaret could not endure him! She had no patience with the spoiled pet, with the blind idolatry lavished on him by his female friends; and the exulting confidence with which they predicted for him the triumph of a 'double-first' almost provoked her to wish them a disappointment, but that the disappointment would be as severely felt by Sir Loys and Caryl, who were quite as firmly persuaded that Colin could never fail in anything he chose to undertake.

'And that,' said Helen plaintively, 'is

what vexes my uncle so in Colin's refusal to enter the Church, where he would so certainly win distinction. He would, no doubt, soon become a bishop, as his great-great uncle was.'

The idea of Collingwood as a bishop sent Margaret into fits of laughter, which offended his little advocate.

'You may laugh, Margaret; but Miss Marston always says that he only needs persistency and singleness of aim to raise him to the greatest height, in any direction he may choose.'

'But why a bishop? Why does Sir Loys wish him to study for the Church?'

'Because there is a rich living in the gift of the Fernleigh family that has always been considered a provision for its younger sons.'

'Oh! well, you would make a charming clergyman's wife, Helen.' And then Helen

would turn away with a smile and a blush.

But Collingwood seemed to care nothing for her blushes or her smiles; he was at Oxford, and he neither visited his friends in Paris nor sent any message to Helen in the hurried fond little notes that he frequently scrawled to Queen Mab. Margaret wondered how a girl could thus meekly and patiently wait until the superb sultan of her affections might deign to throw the handkerchief to her. For she had loved him from a child, till the love laughed at by his relatives at first as a mere childish fancy had grown to be quite a recognised reality among them; and its object was the only one among them who seemed perfectly unconscious of and indifferent to it.

But how about Caryl? Had Margaret yet enthroned him on the shrine of her maiden

fancy as her heart's acknowledged lord? Not yet; not quite yet. She yielded a ready assent to all that Helen or Mabel could say in praise of his gentleness, his generosity, his pure devotion to truth and beauty, his sympathy alike with the strength that aspires, with the weakness that fails. She was flattered by the unconcealed admiration of other women for the grace of his person and manners, and she was, above all, proud to see, as she not unfrequently did, men distinguished in the world of science or of letters, listening with respect and deference to the modest eloquence of those rich melodious tones. She liked to feel that this young man, so graceful, so amiable, so gifted, *belonged to her*; but the sweet sense of self-surrender, that special joy and crown of womanhood, was all unknown and uncared for by her.

In one point she utterly mistook her lover, and the mistake was injurious to him. To Caryl Fernleigh, pure in heart and life, there was in all womanhood a sacredness which is scarcely dreamed of by men who have trifled with or profaned their sense of what is holy. But Margaret mistook a homage rendered to all her sex in her, for a special recognition of her own superiority, and, dimly conscious of her unworthiness of it, rather despised it in him as a weakness. It was as though a graven image should scorn the being of higher powers who had lifted it to a shrine above him, and fallen prostrate to adore it. She failed to perceive that she was prized and valued like some vase of delicate porcelain, the more precious for its fragility.

At length the happy hours have fleeted by, and the pleasant trip has ended. It was

soft, bright, April weather when Miss Marston returned with her young charge to Hartsknoll. Caryl had escorted them from Paris, and Sir Loys and Mr. Fielding were at the station to receive them on their arrival. But not all the entreaties of the old baronet could prevail upon his friend to suffer the whole party to proceed together to finish the evening at the Park.

'Not to-night, Sir Loys. I cannot indeed; I have not seen my daughter for months, remember; and she must resume her suspended duties as mistress of my deserted house. Besides, I am sure she is tired.'

'Tired?' echoed Sir Loys, 'why she looks as blooming as a rose, more so than my Helen here, who does look a little pale. However, it is natural that you should wish to have her all to yourself again, and it was very good of you to give her up for so long;

so, Car'l, make your adieu and take charge of Helen home ; I will see to Mabel ; but you must come to us to-morrow, Margaret, for my sister's rheumatic knee is very bad, and she cannot come to you.'

And so they parted, with the customary shower of farewell embraces from Helen and Mabel, while Caryl *looked* caresses much warmer and closer, which he would scarcely have ventured to offer, except in looks ; then he handed his beloved into the little pony-carriage, and tenderly tucked the leopard-skin round her feet, and whispered softly, as he clasped the little hand, which vouchsafed so *very* nearly to return his fond pressure—'to-morrow.' Then he drew back. Mr. Fielding took his place beside his daughter, and the carriage drove merrily off, while the lover looked after it, and shivered slightly.

'Caryl,' called Queen Mab, 'come, make haste, you are taking cold.'

'Surely,' said Sir Loys laughing, 'though his sun has set for to-day it has left glow enough behind it to keep him from a chill.'

'I saw him shiver, so I suppose it did not.'

'Some one was walking over my grave,' answered Caryl.

'See there!' said his father, still smiling, 'he is dismal enough, now. His summer sun is a tropical one, and sets suddenly in darkness. Come quick, my boy, Aunt Flo is dying to see these ladies again, and have news of the last French fashions.'

CHAPTER IX.

MEREDITH CLAIMS THE REWARD.

Believe not these suggestions, which proceed
From anguish of the mind, and humours black
That mingle with thy fancy. *Samson Agonistes.*

'Now Margaret, my love, going to the Park this morning, and you only came home last night! I *did* hope that you would have given me *one* day. Fernleigh is robbing me before the time.'

'I was not going to the Park, papa,' answered Margaret, 'only to the cottage, to take Miss Marston a little parcel of hers that has found its way into my boxes.'

thing in my power to make you happy—to deserve your confidence? And if "anything should happen" to me (that is the conventional phrase, you know, for the one thing that is certain to happen) and you should then find that I had not been always successful in my care for your interests, could you forgive me, and stand between my memory and the world's reproach?'

She stooped down, and kissed his forehead, a caress which from her had almost a sacramental solemnity.

'Father,' she said, 'we are no strangers *now*; you have my entire trust and confidence, and whatever you do for me, be it success or failure, shall never be questioned in *my* hearing.'

Mr. Fielding's countenance brightened.

'You know, love,' he rejoined, 'or rather you don't know, for ladies are little conver-

sant with such matters, that there is so much uncertainty in everything relating to monied interest, the best we can do turns out wrong sometimes, and then the outcry of the world! There is no crime so great as that of the unsuccessful speculator.'

'Have you been speculating, then?' enquired Margaret, a little uneasily.

Mr. Fielding laughed, and patted her cheek.

'I'll tell you the whole truth, my pet. That surly old godfather of yours has taken offence at my not having advertised earlier for a portfolio of his that, he says, was lost at the time of poor Evans' death, when we were all in such distress and confusion; and he threatens to punish *me* by disinheriting *you*. If through any imprudence of mine you should find yourself defrauded of such wealth, could you forgive me,

and screen me from the misrepresentations of others?'

'If that is all your trouble,' answered Margaret, gaily; 'you may set your mind at rest. I have never given a thought to Mr. Morton or his money. I have everything I can wish for; we have no very expensive habits here; why should we sigh for more riches than we should know how to spend?'

And, indeed, the regret pressed very lightly upon her; she had forgotten it before she arrived at Miss Marston's cottage, and after an hour's chat with Mabel she returned home, leaving a message of excuse for Caryl, who was to call for his cousin in the afternoon, to accompany her to the Park. But her headache was a true plea, and no excuse, and the walk greatly increased it; and when she reached the library she felt dis-

inclined to stoop over the huge box of books that stood uncorded and still unpacked before the sofa, in the recess of a deep bay window. She looked into it, turned over a volume or two, and then wearily threw herself on the sofa, and, lulled by the stillness and warmth of the room, fell fast asleep. She stirred slightly, when the door opened, and her father entered, talking carelessly to Meredith the gamekeeper, who followed close behind him. But by this time the daylight was fading, the lid of the open box and the draperies of the window threw the sofa on which she lay into shadow, and neither of the men perceived her. Their voices soon sounded faint and distant, and she was asleep again in an instant. Mr. Fielding advanced to the fire, and standing, English fashion, on the hearthrug, with his back to it, he said:

'Now then, Meredith, what is this urgent business of yours? No worry about poachers, I hope? For neither Sir Loys nor I care enough for sport to be plagued to prosecute anybody.'

'Mr. Fernleigh might take that trouble off your hands, sir,' answered Meredith, with a smile that was not altogether amiable, and as he spoke he carefully closed the door behind him, and stepping nearer to his master said, in a low voice: 'I am come about that portfolio that you and Mr. Morton have advertised a reward for.'

Mr. Fielding started, and looked an eager enquiry, but he said nothing.

'No, sir, I haven't got it, nor I can't tell you where it is, but I *know them as can.*'

Perhaps Mr. Fielding's expectations had been too highly raised, and the disappointment was a severe one, for though his lips

moved, he still kept silence. The game-keeper continued:

'Now, Mr. Fielding, you've offered a hundred pounds for a little book as can't be worth many shillings. Would you mind telling me why you'd pay such a mint of money for it?'

'I do mind, certainly; its no business of yours, nor of mine perhaps, why Mr. Morton wishes so much to possess himself of this pocketbook; it is enough for you that the reward is offered, and will be paid.' He paused a moment, and added: 'and that the motive that prompts the offer has no reference to the discovery of the murderer, for which the usual Government reward has been offered. It contained, I know, certain papers that my cousin does not wish to lose. But you have just admitted that you

do not know where it is, that you have not got it.'

'No,' said Meredith, slowly, 'I ha'n't got it. I wish to h—l I had, since it's worth so much; but you've offered 50*l.* for any information about it. If I can give you *that*, will you pay me cash down, and keep dark that you got it from me?'

'If your information is of any value, the money will be paid you cheerfully. As for a promise of secresy, why a great crime has been committed, and ——'

The keeper's face darkened.

'I take your meaning,' said he, sullenly, 'I'd hardly miss it, when my poor boy is being hunted like a fox by them detectives for a murder he's as innocent of as you are; it's not because of *him* that I ask you to keep quiet what I can tell you.'

'No one is condemned unheard, Meredith.

If your son is unjustly suspected of Evans's murder, he is "hunted," as you call it, for poor Parr's, of which he was undoubtedly the cause.'

'So Mr. Fernleigh says; but if it's true, it was in hot blood and in fair fight (Mr. Fielding shook his head), and it's not for Mr. Fernleigh to cast it up at him. Mr. Caryl, indeed! *He* killed my eldest son, my Jem's brother, for a deal less than was between him and Parr.'

'Hush, hush,' said Mr. Fielding, glancing anxiously at the door, 'you are getting excited over this painful subject; and what has it to do with the information you promised?'

But the man disregarded the question.

'Oh, ay,' he said, 'if a poor man's son is unlucky, and beats his enemy a trifle too long, he's only fit for hanging, and has the

hue and cry at his heels for every man that's murdered within a hundred miles of him afterwards, till he's caught; but when a gentleman fancies his servant's wife, may be, and flings him into the sea for meddling with him, it's only a misfortin' then; it's all hushed up, and people are murdered or robbed at his very doors, but nobody ever looks *his* way to find them as has done it.'

'You are raving,' said Fielding, sternly; 'you will do your son no good by this intemperate language; come back to the point if you have really any communication to make, and if not, take yourself off home at once.'

'All right, master. I'm not so far from the point as you fancy. If I name the man in whose hands the pocket-book was seen last, after Mr. Evans's accident, shall I have the fifty pounds reward?'

'Assuredly, if you can prove it.'

'That's what I just don't want to do; it'll do me more harm to be known in this business than your money will do me good.'

'Confound you!' cried the merchant, out of all patience with the man's prolixity; 'tell me all you have got to tell, and you shall have the money before you leave the room, and you may take it and yourself to the devil, if you choose.'

Meredith smiled grimly.

'It was a little Morocco and Rooshian leather pocket-book, wasn't it? so big? and it had silver lock and ornaments upon it, and "Edward Charles Morton" in silver letters outside?'

'Yes, yes,' said Fielding, eagerly, 'when did you see it? where is it? who has it?'

'It's Mr. Caryl Fernleigh has it,' answered the keeper, very deliberately; 'leastways,

I saw it, and a packet of papers he took out of it, in his hands the night Evans was found dead in the Coppice.'

Fielding stared at him with a bewildered, stupefied air, but said not a word.

'Don't take it to heart, sir,' continued Meredith, 'it may be no harm after all, and if, as they say, he's going to be married to your young lady, you may keep the secret close among you for me. I wouldn't ha' named it, but I want the money. I don't care to meddle with Mr. Fernleigh, for as meek as he looks no one comes to luck as quarrels with *him*, as poor Mr. Evans could bear witness.'

Mr. Fielding looked up in surprise.

'Evans? he had no quarrel with Fernleigh; you are raving, Meredith; you must have been drinking.'

'No, sir, I never drink; and as for raving,

it wasn't for love, I fancy, that Mr. Evans and Mr. Caryl fought in the wood the day Mr. Evans went to town from you. Mr. Caryl didn't get a black eye from him for a friendly token, may be.'

'What could they fight about? Caryl Fernleigh fight? It's not possible.'

'Well, maybe they didn't. Mr. Fernleigh was never a fighter; but anyhow Evans knocked him down, and main frighted he was, the fool, when he'd done it. I don't know what they quarreled about. I guess it was for them papers that I saw afterwards in Mr. Fernleigh's hands. I don't know nothin' about that, I only tell you what I see with my own eyes.'

'What have you seen? Tell me the whole.'

Mr. Fielding's voice was hoarse with suppressed emotion, and he sat down on the chair nearest him, and passed his handker-

chief across his face, nor, to judge by the keeper's hesitation, was he himself quite unmoved.

'That night, it might have been an hour or so after I met Evans coming from the station—I can't be sure of the time, for I'd been over to John Morris's to take him a couple of rabbits, and I was loitering about the wood, looking for the weasel traps your housekeeper had asked me for ——'

'Yes, yes, well? Never mind the time.'

'I was in the thick of the wood, not far from the Beechen Coppice, stooping down among the withered fern to find my trap, which the vermin had dragged away from where I set it, and I heard a man's foot crackling among the leaves not far from me. I kept close, for I thought it was some one a trespassing there, and I wanted to identify him.'

'But it was dark, too dark to identify any one at a few yards' distance.'

'It was darkish where I stood among the brake, but the moon shone out now and then, and there was light enough to show me that the gentleman was no trespasser.'

'You recognised him?'

'Not just at first; his back was to me, and he was as if he were reading something, but it wasn't light enough to see to read. He walked unsteady-like, and stopped near the old beech there with the hollow trunk.'

'The beech, what beech?' enquired Fielding eagerly, 'can you point it out to me?'

'In course. But it's no good; wait a-bit. Well, he stopped there, and looked round, but there was a low bough hid his face from me. I could only see that he wore one of

those Scotch caps, like you and Mr. Evans and all the gentlemen are wearing. I could see the ribbons fluttering against the sky. He held something in his hand that glittered in the moonlight. I saw him look at it, and look round him again, and then he reached up his hand and dropped it into the hole in the tree; then he turned back into the wood and I lost sight of him.'

'Didn't you follow him?'

'Not I, gentlefolks' secrets is no business of mine; why should I follow him? I knowed it was Mr. Fernleigh; I could swear to that.'

'Yet you say you did not see his face.'

'No, sir. But when he reached up his hand to the tree to drop his packet in, I saw the flash of a diamond on his finger—the ring Mr. Fernleigh always wears. I knew him at once by that. Who else could be in

the Coppice at that hour, with that ring on?'

A long silence followed. The keeper resumed.

'When he was clear gone, I *did* make free to look for what he'd been hiding in that magpie fashion. The hole warn't deep, and I fished out of it the portfolio you say is the one you're advertising for, and a parcel of letters.'

'To whom were the letters addressed?'

'I can't say. I'm no scholar for handwriting, though I could read the letters in silver print upon the pocket-book.'

Another silence, then Mr. Fielding stooped down and stirred the fire, which blazed suddenly up, and threw a flickering light upon Meredith's face.

'Now,' he said abruptly, 'where are these things you found in the tree?'

'They warn't no use to me; I dropped 'em back where I found 'em.'

'But you would look for them again when the discovery of that—that dreadful crime gave an interest to any mysterious transaction in that place and at that hour?'

'I did look for 'em, sir; there warn't no enquiry about 'em at the inquest, but I went there from curiosity next morning to look for 'em. But they were gone. I have never had tale nor tidings of 'em since.'

'And why did you say nothing of this at the inquest?'

'Nobody asked for it—how could I know that Mr. Fernleigh had taken the book from ——'

'Well, but you might have mentioned it later.'

'Yes, sir, and get the sack for my pains. You gentlefolk hold by one another. Who'd

have taken my word against Mr. Fernleigh?'

'True for you; and you expect that for this improbable story I shall give you fifty pounds? My good fellow, you must take me for a fool.'

'That's as how it 'll turn out, sir, asking your pardon,' answered Meredith composedly. 'If you won't give it now, you'll may be wish you'd given more later.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean I ought to have told it at the inquest, but it mayn't be too late yet. My son may be helped by my speaking out, though Mr. Fernleigh won't.'

'Why have you not spoken to Mr. Fernleigh himself? If the secret is his he would have paid you to keep it, I suppose.'

'It's you and your partner, sir, who advertised the reward, and not Mr. Caryl. You

don't know him if you think he'd buy off any secret of his. Mild as he looks, he's ten times harder to move than Mr. Collingwood, who looks so much fiercer and stronger. Besides I could'nt *prove* it was him, though I know it was.'

'Just so. Well, I suppose you must have the reward since it has been promised, though your information is not of the slightest value. Stop, I'll give you the money at once. Will you have it in gold?'

He moved to his secrétaire as he spoke, counted out the money in two glittering piles, then laying his hand upon it, fixed his eyes on the keeper, and said carelessly:

'Now, Meredith, tell me—supposing this tale of yours to have been true—what inference do you draw from this odd action of Mr. Fernleigh's; if it *was* Mr. Fernleigh?'

'Inference?'

'I mean why did he do it, do you think?'

'Can't say, I don't accuse nobody of nothing as isn't found out. I know that Mr. Fernleigh killed my boy Edward in Italy, and ——'

'Now, Meredith!' expostulated his master, 'that has nothing to do with the present case. It does not follow, because a man kills another by accident—of course that affair with your son *was* an accident, that he will kill anybody else on purpose, and without motive.'

'No,' said Meredith, slowly, 'nor I don't say that he did kill him. But he wanted what he'd got about him, anyhow. He wanted *that*; and he wanted to hide that he'd got it. And he'd quarrelled with him not long before, and got hit by him, and was too proud to tell; all that looks ugly,

don't it now, sir? Half as much would hang my Jem, if they could catch him.'

'Look here, Meredith, the whole story rests on your sole witness—yours, who have every interest in trying to avert suspicion from your son, by directing it upon others. Of course no one would believe this wild story; but village gossip is easily raised, and any talk on such a subject would be extremely painful to Miss Fielding.'

'Yes, sir,' replied Meredith, seeing that some answer was expected from him.

'If any further occurrence should throw light upon the disappearance of this portfolio and its contents, you must let me know it *at once*, and *privately*; but on no account breathe a word to any one of what has passed between us to-day. On this condition, I will pay you the money here.'

'All right, sir. I'm willing enough [to

hold my tongue. I told you before, it *don't pay* to meddle with Mr. Fernleigh.'

'Here, hold out your hand.' The merchant counted out the money into the man's hand. 'Now remember. Not a word to any living soul; and when you bring me the portfolio, or the papers, the reward is double. There, good night.'

CHAPTER X.

A LADY-DETECTIVE.

This sword's *hilt* is the sharpest, and cuts through
The hand that wields it. *Drama of Exile.*

HAVING dismissed the keeper, Mr. Fielding sat a long time with his head resting on his hands, gazing pensively into the fire, which was now throwing a cheerful blaze into every corner of the room. At length he lifted his head with a deep sigh, but almost sprang from his chair when the sigh was faintly echoed behind him, and a light touch was laid on his shoulder. He started

round with a terrified exclamation, but recovered himself by a strong effort, when he saw his daughter standing near him.

'Margaret! how did you come there? I never heard you come in.'

Miss Fielding came forward, and stood looking fixedly into her father's eyes. Her voice was clear and steady, but her cheek was white as ashes.

'I have been in the room all the time, papa. I was asleep at first, but I awoke just before Meredith named Caryl Fernleigh.'

Mr. Fielding stooped again over the fire, with an averted head. At last he said:

'I am deeply sorry, my child, that you should have overheard this, but you need attach no importance to it. It is a mere device of that fellow's to extort money.'

'No, papa, it is no invention.'

'My dear girl, consider; what use would

poor Evans' papers have been to Fernleigh? He could not even have known what they were.'

'He did know; they were my letters to Evans. I myself begged him to get them from Willoughby for me.'

Mr. Fielding looked confusedly at her, like a man aroused from a dream; then he said, peevishly:

'If he got them for you he would give them to you. What are you driving at, child?'

'Papa! (her voice was still calm, though her very lips were pale)—Don't you see—can you fail to see—that the man whom Meredith saw concealing the things he had just taken from the person of a murdered man could only have been—must have been ——'

'Please, sir, the dinner-bell has rung

twice. Shall Charles take down the fish to keep it hot?'

The butler's enquiry seemed a great relief to Mr. Fielding.

'No, Harrison, we will be at table in a minute or two. My love,' he said to his daughter, 'we will talk this all over by-and-by. Don't worry yourself about what may really be no mystery after all. We must not excite the servant's curiosity; come down to dinner.'

'I am not dressed.'

'Nor am I; we will waive ceremony for once—come.'

Margaret took her father's arm, and made a few steps to the door; then she stopped, shivered, and withdrawing her hand, sat down in the seat he had quitted, while he stood looking down upon her anxiously.

'I can't dine, I am so sick.'

'True, you have had a nervous headache all day. Stop here, and I'll send you a glass of wine, and something light. You'll try to eat, to please me, dear, will you not?'

Margaret promised, and Mr. Fielding left her. He did not eat much dinner himself that day, and drank more wine than usual. The servants noticed both facts, and founded thereon a theory to the effect that 'all wasn't right between the young people as to settlements.' But the wine did him good, for when he rejoined his daughter in the library he was more cheerful than usual. He sat down beside her, and took her hand.

'You took what I sent you, dear? That's right, you are better now?'

Yes, Margaret was better; quite well, indeed, only for that sick feeling that *would* come over her now and then.

'You have had "a turn," as your poor

mother used to say; that stupid fellow, with his lies, has put us both out. Forget all about it; either he invented it or ——'

'He could *not* have invented it. No one except Caryl and I knew that Willoughby *had* those letters.'

'Nonsense! he only said there *were* letters, not that they were *yours*. What should a portfolio contain *but* letters? The most ignorant man could guess *that*. Besides, if he *did* see a person with it, he owns he did not see his face; it was some stranger.'

'Whoever it was, you admit that no one but the murderer would be at the pains to conceal property that had just been taken from the person of a murdered man?'

'I admit nothing of the sort,' answered her father, sharply. 'Good heavens! Margaret, what madness possesses you, to try to fix such a guilt upon your lover? Are you

weak enough to fancy that a man of character and position would commit an assassination, from no other motive than that of getting your silly letters for you, because you wished for them?'

Margaret's reply was given with distinctness.

'No, I do not think that at all. I only fear that Caryl might have met with some insolence from Willoughby in demanding those wretched letters, and that in the heat of passion ——'

She stopped shuddering, and grew so pale that her father hastily poured out a glass of wine and offered it her. She put it aside and resumed.

'He had quarrelled before with Evans, and had received a blow from him. Did you know that before Meredith told you?'

'I did not.'

'But you *do* know that one of Meredith's sons came by his death at the hands of this man, who we all thought so averse to even the contemplation of suffering or death? Is not there some inconsistency here?'

'I know nothing of that history of young Meredith, except that he perished by accident—a pure accident, I believe—Margaret! I cannot sit and listen to you trying to fix the guilt of the gravest crime upon the man who loves you—the man who is to be your husband—it is revolting! Why, on the same slight evidence you would suspect your own father!'

Margaret seemed not to hear him; her eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the floor; then she said suddenly:

'Papa, did you give Caryl back his ring that night before—you know?'

'Of course I did—at least—how can I remember such a trifle, occurring at such a time! Why, Margaret, I said you would convict your own father. Do you now wish to transfer your suspicions from Fernleigh to me?'

Mr. Fielding's hands trembled, and his voice was hoarse with angry excitement. Margaret looked at him in astonishment.

'Dear papa,' she answered, 'how can you make me such an absurd reproach? *You* had no quarrel with poor Willoughby, and how could you be suspected of concealing a paper that you are so anxious now to regain?'

'Of course not,' said her father, more calmly, and added with a faint laugh: 'But if you are going to turn detective, Margaret, you may trouble people as innocent as myself. I'll tell you what it is, the whole story

is a fiction. I have made a fool of myself by listening to it. Pray drop the subject, at once and for ever.'

'What if I confront Caryl with this strange story, and ask him to explain it?'

Mr. Fielding started to his feet in horror and dismay.

'Child! are you raving? What girl in her senses would dare to tax an honourable man —a gentleman—with such a crime? He would never forgive you. Sir Loys would never forgive you. The reconciliation with my family, to which I have looked forward for years, would be turned into the bitterest enmity. If you are tired of your lover, and want an excuse for breaking off your engagement, for Heaven's sake choose one that will not make us both ridiculous. If you have any regard for *me* promise me that you will

never offer Mr. Fernleigh such an insult as *that.*'

'Well,' answered Margaret, 'I promise; and indeed if this story furnishes any clue to Caryl's character, it is one that must be patiently and watchfully followed.'

'Pshaw!' rejoined her father fretfully, 'let me hear no more of such nonsense, or I shall think that for all your grandmamma's teachings, you have been indulging in a course of "sensational" reading, until you see in every man you meet in society a possible murderer or thief. If there is any truth at all in Meredith's tale, the man he saw was probably one of his ruffianly son's accomplices, who finding his booty valueless hid it in the first place near at hand, that it might furnish no clue to his tracks. The fine dress, the diamond ring, were invented to avert suspicion from his son, and fix it

upon Caryl, whom he hates. Why was he silent on all this at the inquest?'

To which Margaret only replied :

'I should like to go to bed.' But she did not sleep much that night. She lay revolving in her mind every minutest circumstance in the keeper's story, and the charge he had brought against Caryl of having murdered his eldest son—a charge which Mr. Fielding himself had but feebly rebutted. What could this mean? That there was some painful memory in Caryl's life in connection with one of Meredith's sons she knew. But the young man had never spoken of it to her, and his family had been equally reserved. Helen, indeed, had admitted that in years past some great sorrow or shock had befallen her cousin, but that the circumstances of it were imperfectly known to her, as she was at school in England when it happened. But

she had shown so marked a dislike to the topic, that delicacy and good breeding had withheld Miss Fielding from pursuing it. She mused over the conversation her lover had held with her in the garden when she had confessed her imprudent correspondence with Evans, and saw that it must have been during his previous interview with the clerk that the young men had quarrelled and—fought! Fought! she could once as soon have suspected Caryl of gaming as of fighting. Ah! what did she not suspect him of now? And she turned uneasily on her pillow, as a saying of Helen Grenfell's recurred to her when she had laughed at her blind confidence in Collingwood. 'I trust Collingwood, because I love him. Love is the parent of trust.' Yet it was just this blind faith against which Lady Tolmaine had always warned her, this slavish submission

of intellect to feeling. *She* had always declared that with her, love should be the offspring, not the parent, of confidence. And now came the test, when she was just dozing off, like any other weak lovesick girl, into a fond dream of her lover's perfections! But the awakening—must it be to *this*? And Caryl's face seemed to rise before her, and gleam palely on the surrounding darkness, the calm thoughtful brow, the refined sensitive mouth, the clear sad eyes, with their depths of purity and tenderness. But he could fight! he *did* fight! he was knocked down! (he said he fell) he had a yellow bruise round his eye for nearly a fortnight after! What expression, that *she* had never seen upon those delicate features, must have animated and distorted them then? Oh yes, she *had* seen it; she remembered the look, whose sternness her now excited fancy exaggerated

to fierceness, which she had surprised in his face that very evening. It would scarcely have had time to fade before he met Evans (if he *did* meet him) in the wood. And again Margaret buried her face in the pillow, pressing it deep down, in the vain effort to escape the eyes that *would* look out on her from the darkness, with their gaze of melancholy reproach.

She would appeal against that unmerited reproach. Why had he not trusted her? Then she could have forgiven him. For her worst suspicion pointed not to a wilful murder—*that*, of course, was out of the question—but to a hasty act of violence, provoked doubtless by excessive and insolent aggravation. For this, the impulse of a moment, to be atoned for probably by the remorse of years, she could have forgiven her lover, even though his yielding to it for

the *second* time proved that in the lamb there was a cross of the tiger; but cowardice, deceit, does any woman forgive *that*? If, even after that wretched, selfish, *sneaking* attempt at concealment that Meredith had witnessed, he had thrown himself on her pity, her generosity, and confessed all! But the avowal that he had withheld from her she would force from him yet. She would wring it from him, if necessary, by the tortures of remorse, kept alive day by day, hour by hour, as the inquisitors strove to weary out their criminals by the test of sleeplessness. She did not mean to be cruel. No; from this fiery crucible, love and trust might ultimately emerge, pure and bright, as the religious faith which bigots hope to evolve from the torments of the furnace and the rack.

Take care, Margaret, take care! No

touch can safely tamper with the delicate springs of the human heart and conscience. In thus forcing open the heart of Caryl to read its secret guilt or suffering, you may find that in its sudden recoil, it has closed for ever against *you.*

But no thought of *that* danger ever flitted over Miss Fielding's brain, to disturb her almost contemptuous security in her lover's devotion—his inalienable devotion to *her.*

CHAPTER XI.

INFERENCES.

Look not back,—
'Tis that way darkness lies.
St. Clement's Eve.

MR. FIELDING was more surprised than gratified when, a few weeks after the conversation we have recorded between him and Meredith, Mr. Morton suddenly made his appearance at Fernleigh Manor, without even such an announcement of his intended visit as would have given his cousin time to drive to the station to meet him. What could be the object of this unexpected

invasion? Morton had never been a very pleasant or genial companion; though as long as their business connection had lasted, a community of interest had been a sufficient bond of union between the partners. But since his last illness, the temper of the millionaire had changed materially for the worse, and the failure of his plans for enriching his protégé at the expense of his legitimate heir seemed to be the source of unreasonable irritability and suspicion. Doubtless, Evans' death had been a great shock to him; for although he had at first contented himself with bestowing on the youth the solid advantages of education and patronage, and had not admitted him to any greater intimacy than usually exists between a wealthy merchant and his paid subordinates, he had of late much relaxed this strict reserve, and from the time that he had

fancied his god-daughter's affections pledged to Willoughby he had begun to feel in him the interest an old man sometimes takes in his destined heir; when the sudden and violent death of its object put an end to all the hopes and aims which, centring in another than himself, had given his waning life a new charm. He was disappointed, and the disappointment alone would have made him peevish; but the certainty that his cousin secretly rejoiced in his disappointment annoyed him still more, with the sense of defeat, and inclined him to revenge upon Fielding the vague discomfort of which he was the cause. He had never really dreamed that the merchant had murdered the unhappy young man, but he had chosen to dwell upon the suggestion, because he saw that it not only shocked but even alarmed the timid and sensitive Fielding. He *did*

believe that he had possessed himself of the will, and had destroyed it; and the mean dishonesty of such an action was deserving, he thought, of the severest punishment he could inflict upon him. His present visit had no motive but simple curiosity to see his friend's new residence, and the family with whom he claimed relationship; but Mr. Fielding had not forgotten the conversation he had held with him in town, and at once attributed his sudden appearance to an intention of investigating in person all the circumstances connected with the disappearance of his beloved portfolio. With Meredith's revelation yet fresh in his remembrance, it is no wonder that Fielding felt uneasy, or that his welcome, amid all its affected cordiality, had something of constraint in it. No sooner had Morton retired to dress for dinner than he hastened to his daughter's

room. She was seated at the window, looking rather absently at her maid, who was employed in combing out—not her mistress's braids, but the curls of the little spaniel, whose occasional resistance to the operation was only subdued by a word of admonition from Margaret. She glanced up as her father entered, and signed to the maid to leave the room. Mr. Fielding drew a chair beside her.

'Margaret, my love, this is a very awkward thing; this freak of Morton's of coming here.'

'Why so, papa?' she asked in surprise. 'I should have thought, that since you parted with him on rather unfriendly terms, this visit must be intended as conciliatory.'

'Well yes, perhaps, in that light; but if he comes, as I fear he does, to ferret out all about that paper which was lost when Evans died, it may cause a great deal of——of——'

Margaret flushed crimson, and then turned pale.

'What can he do, sir? Every enquiry was made at the time, and failed; he has not brought down a company of lawyers or detectives, has he?' And she laughed, but her laugh was rather dreary.

'To come to the point at once,' answered her father, 'it would be extremely unpleasant for us all if, for instance, he were to hear the strange story that Meredith told me.'

'I don't know,' she said, sighing; 'would it not be well that all possible light should be thrown on this sad mystery; that the suspected—whoever he may be—may be convicted or cleared for ever?'

'Nonsense, child; there is no one suspected. I am fully persuaded that Meredith's story was invented to extort money from me, for

his worthless son; and I don't want it to come to Morton's ears, to be twitted for ever with my foolish credulity, that's all.'

'Why should Meredith repeat the story, since he has gained all he can gain by it?'

'But has he gained all? If Morton should question him, should offer him a fresh bribe?'

'Well, you need have no anxiety about that at present, for Meredith has gone away.'

'Gone away? where? when?' asked Fielding, eagerly.

But Margaret replied very calmly:

'I forgot to tell you before, but early this morning, before breakfast, I met him in the shrubbery. He was coming here in a great hurry, but on seeing me he stopped, and asked me to explain to you that he had just seen an advertisement of a dog of the breed you wanted, and he was off by train to see

it, to London; and that he hoped you would excuse him if he was not back for some days, as there were several things he wanted to see about while he was in town.'

'I want no dog, it is a lie of his; he is off to start his son from some other seaport than London, probably Bristol or Cardiff, with the money I was fool enough to pay him. However, I am glad he is out of the way; if he returns before Morton leaves us, I can send him on some other commission. It is a great relief to me that he is out of the way.'

A silence; then Margaret said:

'I am sure you *do* believe Meredith's story, papa, or why would you be so anxious to suppress it? It would be far better that Caryl Fernleigh should hear it too. If he has in truth committed this great crime, let him plead his own excuse, or suffer his own pun-

ishment; concealment may be a wrong to him, but can scarcely be a kindness.'

'Margaret,' replied her father; 'your imagination overpowers your common sense, or you would know that only in romances are crimes committed for such motives as you suppose to have instigated your lover to this. Why, even granting that Meredith really witnessed the action he described, and was not mistaken in the identity of the actor, why should you imagine that Caryl had raised his hand against Willoughby? We will suppose that he was passing through the Coppice shortly after the poor fellow's murder. He finds in his path the book that the disappointed assassin has flung away, as valueless to him, and seeing your handwriting on the letters it contained——'

Here Mr. Fielding paused.

'Ah,' said Margaret, with a sad smile, 'you

recognise a difficulty there; why should he conceal the letter-case instead of restoring it, at least to me? Why remain silent on the fact of his discovery, when Evans' terrible death had made it of such importance?'

Mr. Fielding did not immediately reply. She looked towards him, but he had turned from her, and was bending over a pencil sketch of hers that lay on the table near him. Presently—

'Margaret,' he said, 'give me your pencil; here is a line that I think I can improve in your drawing—thank you—now listen to me. Is this act of Caryl's (supposing it be his) your sole ground for the strange suspicion you express of him?'

Margaret mused a little, and then said:

'I suppose so; yes, of course it is.'

'Very well. Now just substitute *my* name for Caryl's in Meredith's story; suppose

that he had mistaken *me* for Fernleigh, what then would be your inference?'

'But I cannot suppose that. What motive could you possibly have for such an act? *You* never quarrelled with Willoughby, and why should you try to conceal the pocket-book of which you are now so anxious to possess yourself?'

'Just so; true; but try to *imagine* the case, will you, for the sake of my argument? Suppose some motive to have existed, stronger than the weak and insufficient one you attribute to Caryl for my wishing to conceal those papers.'

'But then ——'

'Let me go on. Granting all these facts, would you draw the same inference, that this unfortunate man fell by my hand?'

'*I* should not, of course; but ——'

'But the world in general would?'

'Possibly; but where the facts are so *impossible* to imagine, how can any inference from them be suggested?'

'You are inconsequent, Margaret; and you condemn Caryl upon evidence on which you confess you would decline to convict *me*.'

'You mistake me,' she answered eagerly; 'in your case—if such a case were conceivable—it would be a hideous deliberate crime of which you would be suspected ——'

'Ah! I *should* be suspected, then?'

'Perhaps so, judging only by the laws of circumstantial evidence; but don't you see that in Caryl's case it is altogether different. We cannot tell what may have passed between him and Evans. Evans may have been very insolent to him; he may even have struck him—as Meredith says he did once before; and in self-defence, in retaliation,

in natural and violent excitement, Caryl may have committed a deed that he would give his life to recall. It must have been so, it *could* only have been so.'

She stopped, but her father did not speak; he was busy effacing her sketch. At last he threw down the pencil and looked up.

'And pray how does Meredith's wild tale fit into this wilder romance of yours?'

'Oh,' she answered, 'I can well understand the horror and loathing with which Caryl would cast from him a prize so dearly bought as those wretched letters were. He never could touch, never look at them again.'

Mr. Fielding interrupted her impatiently.

'I can listen no longer to such ravings, child. Your grandmother's good sense has not been very influential with you after all, if you can still give the reins to your

imagination in this way. As for speaking on this subject to Caryl, I forbid you most peremptorily to do so, at least while you remain under my jurisdiction. When you are married to him you may accuse him to his face of all the sins in the Commination Service, if you like. Meantime, I advise you to be cautious. Morton is a little prejudiced against our friends at Fernleigh, and if by any girlish folly of yours you confirm him in that prejudice, you will lose your last chance of becoming his heiress, when you wed the heir of Fernleigh Park.'

And without waiting her reply, Mr. Fielding left her.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MILLIONAIRE AT FERNLEIGH.

It once might have been, once only,
We lodged in a street together.
I, a sparrow on the housetop lonely:
You, a lone she-bird of his feather.

R. BROWNING.

MR. MORTON had been nearly a fortnight at the Manor House, and to his host's surprise and relief had never made any further allusion to the missing letter-case, and only one to Willoughby Evans' death. That was when, shortly after his arrival, Fielding was doing the honours of his little demesne, and showing him over the grounds. Morton then

enquired: 'Was it not somewhere in these woods that Evans' body was discovered?' and on receiving the reply, 'It was in a dell a little way out of the public path,' he said, 'Then pray do not take me near that dell. In my state of health, I do not think it advisable to go out of my way in search of painful impressions.' A sentiment in which his cousin very readily acquiesced.

Meredith had not returned, and Fielding would have been quite contented, if only his guest's reticence had been a little less strict as to the disposal of his property in future. But on this point he remained obstinately silent, and Mr. Fielding construed his silence unfavourably, knowing that he was implacable and unrelenting when offended, whether with or without reason; and therefore he still trembled for his—or as it pleased him better to term it—his daughter's inheritance.

He had hoped something from his cousin's presentation to the family at Fernleigh Park, but even here the result was little encouraging. Morton's prejudice against the Fernleighs—against Caryl in particular—was far too deep rooted to be overcome by a few matter-of-course hospitalities, which were all that it was in their power to oppose to it. His own relationship to Fielding was through the respectable family whose kinship his cousin seemed now to contemn, though it was through their wealth and influence, won by honourable industry, that he had risen to a position from which he could aspire to Sir Loys Fernleigh's notice at all; and Morton not unnaturally resented his eagerness to assert a claim which would (he thought) have been but coldly admitted by the baronet if it had not been backed by the present possession of wealth gained for him

through his humbler kindred, and by the prospect of a splendid fortune to be yet bequeathed to him by one of them. 'Very likely (he mused inwardly); he *might* have desired a higher match for his girl than my clerk would have been, even though he were my heir—but yet I don't see why my money should go to enrich those beggarly Fernleighs, merely because he thinks that the name that contented his great-grandfather is not good enough for *him*! And it was a mean sneaking trick of his to treat my will as so much waste paper as soon as he thought the breath was out of me. (A pretty trustee he would make!) Whim for whim, Mr. Thomas Fielding; I had as much right to mine as you have to yours, and I fancy you will find yours the costliest in the long run.'

Meantime, quite unconscious of this by-

play, the family at the Park were doing their utmost to entertain their relative's guest, though none of their hearts were in the duty.

It was not strange that Morton should persist in disliking Caryl. He looked on him, if not as an active accomplice in Fielding's supposed fraud, at least as the person who would chiefly have benefited by its success, and felt towards both the merchant and his destined son-in-law, as a soldier lying wounded and helpless on the field of battle might feel towards comrades who approached not to succour but to rifle him. Caryl's quick sensibility could not fail to detect the unfriendly feeling, though he could not guess at its cause; and though ever gentle and courteous, his reserve grew colder, his courtesy more distant, until Morton believed his prejudice fully justified, and his

distrust of the young man became positive dislike.

Collingwood, as quick in observation as Caryl in sensibility, soon perceived this dislike, and his brotherly love being the warmest sentiment in his nature, he resented it after his own fashion, by such incessant assaults of sly satire, open raillery, or scarcely veiled contempt, that Morton's antipathy to Caryl soon extended with reason to the younger Fernleigh, and even to poor little innocent Helen, who certainly never dreamt of partisanship in a warfare of which she understood nothing. Quiet Sir Loys, too, saw nothing; only recognising in this new member of their little circle a wealthy and influential member of the wider circle beyond, who was to be welcomed with cordiality for Fielding's sake, and with respectful consideration for his own. And

he endeavoured to propitiate him by deferential consultations on matters relating to 'share markets' and 'monied interests'—though, alas! they were 'interests' in which poor Sir Loys had but little 'share.' As for Aunt Flo, her part in the entertainment of visitors lay chiefly in the region of the housekeeper's room, and her efforts were as unsuccessful as the others, for Mr. Morton lived strictly by rule, and declined the most tempting viands that were not set down in his medical dietary. Once only she had made a sortie in the conversational direction, by suddenly interrupting the guest, on whose lips she heard the word 'Stock Exchange,' by the enquiry, 'Was he a bull or a bear, and, *which was which*?' But, recalled to the sense of having made some 'fiasco,' by Sir Loys' consternation and Collingwood's boisterous mirth, she took refuge in her

crochet-work, and was thenceforth heard no more.

It would appear, then, that Mr. Morton was not particularly enjoying himself at Hartsknoll; that he was doing no particular good there, and not particularly wanted there by any one in particular. Then why did he not go away? He was rivetted to the spot (this is a secret, mind) by one little chain alone, and this was unconsciously grasped in the tiny hand of Fernleigh's fairy queen. The fascination of youthful beauty, it is true, had long departed from Mabel Marston, but she still retained the more enduring spell of kindly womanly charity for the suffering and the weak; and by this spell she had captivated the fancy, or the heart, of the sickly, fretful, lonely millionaire, and held him still lingering where he had the most frequent chance of hearing her soothing

voice or meeting her cheering smile. To Mabel, Morton was only the languid joyless invalid, pining in his declining age for the very power of enjoyment which no riches could purchase—friendless too, and homeless, in all that makes the sweet significance of home. So she gave him sympathy, and from Mabel sympathy meant so much! It was not a cold barren pity, apart from all that could give it value, but a generous heart-warm eagerness to do everything that might cheer and comfort. By turns, as his moods varied or his needs demanded, she was the intelligent listener, the tender nurse, the playful lively companion, never impatient, never indifferent, never careless or cold. What wonder that Morton began to time his visits to the Park so as to be always sure of meeting her there? Or that gradually, a project shaped itself

in his brain, by which he might punish Fielding and Caryl, and purchase for himself a pleasant life-interest in the future heiress of his wealth? To be sure, there was Margaret; but it did not matter much about *her*, he thought. 'It will all come right in the end, I daresay; Miss Marston is a relation of the Fernleighs, and greatly attached to them, though they *do* allow her to write for her living; and Miss Margaret is a heartless coquette, or she would not have treated poor Evans as she did. I believe, after all, she liked him the best, for she does not look very happy with her new lover. No doubt, Evans was right in saying that she only chose him because she hoped one day to be 'Lady' Fernleigh. It will serve her right to teach her that a title is not worth much without money to set it off.'

What a queer world this would be if, only

for *one* day, people were all compelled to speak aloud their true thoughts as in Mme. de Genlis' 'Palace of Truth.' Only for one day. But how would they look and feel towards one another on the next? Or how many years would it take to repair the mischief and confusion that *one* day had wrought?

CHAPTER XIII.

QUEEN MAB IN HER PURPLE.

Myself am struck in years, I must confess—
And if I die to-morrow, this is hers,
If, while I live, she will be only mine.

Taming of the Shrew.

MISS MARSTON was seated on the chimney-piece. (On the chimney-piece! that must be a misprint?) No misprint, I repeat it. *Miss Marston was seated on the chimney-piece!* It was an old-fashioned wooden chimney-piece, wide and covered with crimson velvet, bordered with fringe, so that except that it was very high, it was not a very uncomfortable seat, though perhaps scarcely

a convenient or seemly one for a lady of mature years. But Mabel's tiny figure gave her the air of a Dresden china shepherdess, which looks well anywhere, and she had an easy grace of her own, which would not have left her, though you had perched her on a weather-cock. So there she sat, with her little feet dangling among the fringe; scarcely bigger than the tassels, and her eyes pensively fixed on Collingwood Fernleigh, who had raised her to that 'bad eminence,' and sat at the table, calmly revising a MS. of hers that she had submitted to his criticism.

'Take me down, Colin.'

'Read your recantation, then.'

'My principles forbid it.'

'And my principles forbid me to remit your punishment.'

'It is a bad cause that must be supported by persecution.'

'Correction is not persecution.'

'What do you want me to say?'

'Say—I confess that Browning never could have written such a poem as "Idle Tears."'

'I don't suppose he ever tried.'

'Because it was beyond his powers.'

'Nothing is beyond his powers, the greater includes the less; he has written better poems than "Idle Tears."'

'Oh! after that, I've a good mind to stick you on the chimney-pot!'

'Colin, I'm tired; take me down.'

'Recant your errors, and my arms are open to receive you.'

'I'm getting apoplexy in my feet.' No reply. 'I wonder you're not ashamed to treat an aged relative with such disrespect. I'll jump down.'

'You'll break your legs if you do; don't be obstinate, Mab.'

'Well, a compromise then? I'll say Browning never could have written "Idle Tears," if you will admit that Tennyson could never have written "The Blot on the 'Scutcheon?"

Collingwood arose quietly, and put his papers together.

'Godma'! Sir Loys has a new valet.'

'I know he has.'

'He is a Swiss, a remarkably fine man.'

'I don't care, take me down; where are you going to?'

'And he has been very well trained; he has no idea of questioning, much less evading, any order he receives from a superior.'

'I wish you resembled him in that respect,' answered Miss Marston, with as much dignity as she could assume under the circumstances, 'and then you would not make yourself ridiculous in trying to make me so.'

'And I am going home now, and shall

order him to proceed hither immediately, take you down, and carry you to Fernleigh, as if you were a parcel; and he will obey.'

'*Tu en es capable, vilain!*'

Colin turned to the door, but glanced towards the window in passing, and paused.

'Ah! here comes Morton the Auriferous. *He* will take you down. Good-by, godma'.'

'Oh, Colin!' implored Mabel, 'don't be absurd; take me down at once. Mr. Morton will think me mad. Good gracious! he is knocking; take me down.'

'Recant then.'

She hesitated, the steps of the visitor were heard in the little vestibule.

'I recant all, everything—oh! what a bad martyr I should make!'

Collingwood thereupon caught her off the mantel-piece, swinging her light form round as he did so with such energy that he

literally 'threw her at the head' of Mr. Morton, who entered at that moment.

'Ha! Mr. Collingwood,' cried the newcomer, 'are you at high-jinks here? I see now why Mrs. Grenfell calls Miss Marston your doll!'

And as Mabel smiling, though ever so little disconcerted, smoothed her ruffled plumes, and having courteously greeted her guest, subsided into her customary easy chair, Collingwood with his usual *sans façons*, threw open the window, leaped into the garden, and speedily vanished.

'Yes,' she said, in answer to Morton's remark, 'my godson is a little boisterous sometimes; he refuses to recognise our changed relations, since his early play days, when I was big and he was little.' (As if Mabel ever *had* been big!)

By the time she had ended this half apology,

she had quite recovered from her momentary embarrassment, which seemed to have devolved upon her visitor, for he sat beside her, quite silent, glancing, sometimes round the room, sometimes half furtively at her, with the air of a man who has something to say and does not know quite how to say it. For Mr. Morton had come to the cottage with a purpose, and was meditating how to carry it into effect. If Mabel had betrayed the faintest suspicion of that purpose, it would have helped him to declare it; but her perfect unconsciousness completely baffled, I may almost say, *intimidated* him. She did not even observe his abstraction at first, and when she did she attributed it to the depression of ill-health, and exerted herself more than usual to amuse him with a playful, vivacious chatter, through which the intending wooer saw no

opening at all to the proposal he had come to make. For Mr. Morton had come with the deliberate intention of making a proposal of marriage to Miss Marston. It was the first time in his now advanced life that he had ever contemplated such an overture to any lady, and had 'not an idea' (as Aunt Flo would have said) how to set about it. For though fully persuaded that no woman of any rank or age would refuse, not his hand alone, perhaps, but his hand with the wealth it held within it; still he naturally wished to offer it with a grace becoming the gift, and felt a little fluttered and nervous at his own ignorance of the best manner of doing the thing. At length he said, by way of introducing the subject:

'Are you not very lonely here, my dear Miss Marston?'

'Not in the least,' answered Mabel cheer-

fully (a little disgusted in her secret mind at the familiar "my dear," from an acquaintance of a fortnight's date), my relatives at Fernleigh never suffer me to be long alone, and I have too much occupation to feel occasional solitude any burthen.'

'True,' rejoined the merchant, glancing a little pityingly at the books and MSS. with which Collingwood had littered the room in all directions; 'but an employment which may be very pleasant when pursued as a mere amusement, must, I should fear, become too laborious when viewed as a necessary task.'

Mabel opened her blue eyes in astonishment. Hitherto she had seen no peculiar refinement or polish in Morton's manners, but neither had she detected anything that could have prepared her for an observation so impertinent and ill-bred. However, he

was an invalid, and for an invalid Mabel had all but unlimited indulgence; so she only smiled as she replied:

'It is scarcely a necessity with me, Mr. Morton, but if it were I don't know that it would press more heavily on me. I give my best energies to my work, for the work's sake; I could do no more if my daily bread depended upon it.'

Mr. Morton collapsed. He saw no opening for what he wished to say, and was sensible that his first attempt to 'lead up' to the subject had proved a failure. He had intended to treat it from the practical and common-sense point of view; what if he now tried the sentimental? Most women like money, and all love flattery. He drew his chair closer to the lady, and leant over her. She was stroking the cat on her knee, and he gently touched the still delicate little

hand that nestled in her favourite's snowy fur.

'Ah!' he sighed, 'which is the whitest?'

'My hand or yours?' enquired Mabel innocently, looking down upon the skinny mummy-like member that now clasped her own, and beginning to fear that the merchant's *brain* was softening (she never thought of his *heart*).

'Nay,' he said, 'that would be a contrast, not a comparison; I meant ——'

'Oh! Robert's paw, you are looking at? Of course it is much the whitest—and the hairiest!'

Collapse again. Miss Morton leaned back in her chair and waited. Morton's unexpected effort at gallantry had rather surprised her; she wished that he had not brought his chair so close to hers, for she could not move away from him, on

account of the wall; but still she had not the remotest idea that he was assuming the character of a suitor, until he spoke again.

'And have you no regrets for what might have been, dear Miss Marston, as you sit here by your lonely fireside, had you, with your wit and beauty, been less obdurate or less cold? No dreams of what may yet be—you who are still so fascinating? Have you never any yearning for affectionate companionship? for ——'

A faint flush rose to Mabel's cheek, and a light shone in her eyes, which to those who knew her better than Mr. Morton did, would have boded mischief. But she glanced at the shrunken atomy beside her, and softened ere she replied gravely:

'At my age, Mr. Morton, visions of happiness that may yet be, are based on faith and

hope alone, and are, blessed be God, no dreams; and I hold that the vainest of earthly sorrow is the regret for what might have been.'

Her visitor felt that he could never get on at this rate; so, in sheer desperation, he spoke out, and with a bluntness that he had not designed, laid his name and fortune at Miss Marston's feet. That she would decline his proposal had never crossed his imagination. An old maid refuse a husband? Any maid, old or young, refuse a *wealthy* husband? He had never heard of such a thing, and would not have believed it if he had. But he was prepared for a little maidenly coyness, a little feminine coquetry, and did not quite understand the composure and self-possession with which, when his oration (a brief one) had come to an end, Mabel enquired:

'Mr. Morton, do you know how old I am?'

However, he answered with what he flattered himself was a very graceful courtesy:

'When a lady is so attractive as you are, we never give a thought to how long she has been so.'

'Indeed? Well then, I am fifty-two years old; more than half a century.'

'And I, my dear madam, am sixty-three; not such a very great disparity between us, you will admit?'

'No disparity in years, certainly, and none in wisdom either, if I were inclined to make as great a fool of myself as ——. I beg pardon (it was time!) let us forget this folly.'

'Excuse me, Miss Marston, I don't know where you see the folly. I have offered you a name without reproach, a fortune that

Countesses might envy, and the love of an honourable man. I do not see why you should contemn such an offer as that.'

'Do you speak to *me*, a grey-haired woman like *me*, of love?' asked Mabel, turning her full blue eyes upon him, with a look in which anger struggled with ridicule. 'Do you ask me, whom you have barely known a fortnight, for even such love as a woman of my years might feel; and you do not see your folly?'

Mr. Morton began to think he had made a mistake; but he rallied for a final charge, and answered:

'Well, my dear lady, if our comparatively short acquaintance denies me the privilege of appealing to your affections, at least your good sense will find nothing to object to in a *mariage de raison.* I am a lonely bachelor, with indifferent health, more wealth than I

can spend, and no direct heirs to claim it. I need a kind, lively, intelligent companion, and to you, lonely like myself, and compelled to labour—intellectually, it is true, but still to labour—I surely offer an advantageous exchange to leisure and luxury; secured to you, if you will, by settlements which you shall yourself dictate.'

Mabel rose up in wrath, and her tiny figure dilated into fairy majesty as she spoke, with a bitter irony in her clear ringing tones:

'So we come to the conditions of the bargain, Mr. Morton; and I reply that you offer both too little and too much. You offer too much in proposing to give your name and position for such services as any salaried dependent could render you; but to give you the loyal devotion of a wife, I must sacrifice memories which all your gold is too poor to

buy.' (Her eyes half rose to the portrait over the chimney-piece, but dropped again, lest his should follow them.) 'Our home might be the same, but our lives would be for ever divided, because the life of the aged is in the past, and we have no past in common. To the ease and luxury of your home, I prefer the comparative poverty of mine. To me it is far less lonely; it is gladdened with hopes whose roots indeed are memories hidden deep in graves, but whose leafage waves beyond the swiftly lapsing river of life, and whose fruit is surely ripening for me where love and light are one.'

It is not to be supposed that this extraordinary speech of Mabel's was designed for Morton's edification; indeed the latter part of it was murmured to herself in a momentary forgetfulness of his presence. All that he understood of it was that his suit was

rejected, and his person contemned, by an insolent old maid, who lived by booksellers! Naturally he was disgusted. He had risen when Mabel rose, and now stood looking at her, with a look in which admiration—and still less love—had no part at all.

'Then, Miss Marston,' said he fretfully, 'since you choose to consider the subject from such a very—ahem—such a very *exalted* point of view, there is no more to be said. I am sorry you decline to recognise the difference between the services of a hired nurse and the society of a lady in every respect my equal; but you are scarcely so ignorant of the world as not to know that there are many ladies—in no degree your inferiors—who would have received my proposal far more graciously, although doubtless you would blame them for doing so.'

'Not I,' answered Mabel; 'a duty which

would seem difficult or impossible to *me* might be easy and clear to *them*. I blame no one who is strong enough to undertake a burthen which I could not bear for an hour.'

'Enough said, Madam,' cried the millionaire in high indignation, and he turned to the door, contriving to kick over the unsuspecting cat as he passed. 'I wish you a very good morning; I should have been more prepared for the eccentricity of learned ladies; and if all is true that is reported of their fitness for domestic life, you have doubtless done well in electing that yours shall be a solitary one.'

The sneer was not well-bred; but Mr. Morton was in ill health and ill humour, and certainly Mabel was very provoking. But as he tottered from the room, a remorse siezed her, a fear lest she had been unladylike or unkind.

'After all,' she thought, 'he meant to be very complimentary, I dare say;' and her hand was on the lock of the door, to follow him with some word of courtesy and conciliation, when the garden gate banged behind him, with a shock like a miniature earthquake.

Left alone—did Mabel burst into a flood of repentant or indignant tears? or did she spring forward to unveil the portrait on the wall, and call it to witness her late fidelity? As a faithful historian, I am compelled to say she did neither of these things. She stood at the window watching her *last* admirer, and in her gaze a shade of pity, a touch of self-reproach, mingled with an arch expression of merriment. Then, as he vanished in the forest glades, she resumed her seat, saying half aloud as she did so:

'I hope—I *do* hope to goodness—he won't tell anybody!'

He did not. He left Hartsknoll the following morning, and the secret was kept to his dying day.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT COLIN OWED—HIS GODMOTHER.

Vic. There's what I reckon my expenditure.
Chas. A miserable fifty thousand crowns!
King Victor and King Charles.

'WHAT a plague money is,' sighed Mabel Marston.

'Is it?' answered Sir Loys. 'I have never had an opportunity of verifying that assertion, because I have never had any money; but I know too well what a plague it is to be without it, especially with an extravagant son.' And he looked down dejectedly on a heap of bills that lay before

providing for him. I do not blame him for hanging back.'

'You never blame him for anything; you women have ruined the boy. Of course he's not fit for the office of incumbent of Stanage, nor for any other office as yet, but that's no reason for declining to render himself fit for it.'

'He says he is not good enough for a clergyman; and he is not, either.'

'Then he is not good enough for a Christian, and the sooner he begins to amend the better. Do you think that all our young divinity students are sucking saints?'

'All he asks is time. He cannot comply with your wishes at present, but in a year or two he may see things in a different light.'

'In a year or two he will see things in the light of a Bankruptcy Court.'

'Not at all; by that time he may be a

husband and father, and "giving pledges to society" for his future good conduct.'

'Married to some actress or barmaid, perhaps.'

'Married to an heiress, and relieving you from the liabilities you worry about—to our Helen, in short.'

'Mabel Marston! I am surprised at you. You seem to think that a fine conscience belongs to none of the family except your pet, when you take it for granted that I would sacrifice my ward and her fortune to a profligate spendthrift, because he is my son.'

'You can tie up her fortune, and there is no sacrifice. Helen loves Colin, and will care for no one else. How dare you call him profligate, Loys? His only fault is thoughtlessness.'

'I wish I were sure of that,' answered Sir

Loys, glancing at the papers before him. 'What is this long jeweller's bill for? Colin does not wear jewellery.'

Mabel looked puzzled.

'He visits a great deal from home; perhaps he has made expensive presents to his friends' wives or sisters. He has occasionally brought a trinket for Helen or Florence. Such things soon mount up in an account.'

'Ah! here is a saddler's bill, apparently slipped in by accident. Does Colin take riding habits and side-saddles with him when he goes to visit his friends?'

Miss Marston looked down, and coloured slightly, but she would not give up her championship.

'In judging the young,' she said 'we must be merciful, or we shall be less than just. Colin has such an exuberance of vitality, that possibly evil and temptation, which exist

for others chiefly in thought and emotion, must come into *his* experience as forms of life and action.'

'Vitality, forsooth! His vitality will be my mortality. He will break my heart.'

'Nonsense, take a more hopeful view of things.'

'There's not much hopefulness in the view of bills to the tune of some thousands, when I have not as many hundreds to pay them with.'

'It can be managed, I know, and Colin is very repentant; and when he marries Helen he will settle down and be quite steady.'

'Has he deputed you to ask my consent to his marrying Helen?'

'Why no, he has not even asked *her* consent yet; perhaps because he is a *leetle* too sure of it.'

'Then I think you are prematurely reckoning on what may never take place.'

'We won't reckon on it then, but I *will* reckon on your settling all these claims. Why, what would you have? Scores of fathers have sons to the full as extravagant as Colin, with no reason such as you have to be proud of their genius and ability. He has taken his degree with the highest honours, has achieved literary and scholastic eminence, and he not twenty-three yet! And you growl and grumble because you have a few hundreds to pay for him.'

'I will not grumble if you will tell me where I can find the hundreds to pay.'

'That can I. You must cut down the oaks on the Lye. Timber is fetching a high price now, and the woods want thinning.'

'But I promised Caryl that their value should be expended in draining the lowlands

at Heathside, and rebuilding those wretched cottages at Ferndale.'

'Yes, but the bills *must* be paid; and Caryl must do that with the interest of some of his wife's fortune; for I hear that her wealthy godfather is not expected to live through the summer.'

'That is like your rashness, Mab, so confident in reckoning on what may never be. I have heard, from good authority too, that Miss Fielding, after all, will not be Mr. Morton's heiress; there is some split or other between the cousins, and Morton threatens to leave his whole fortune to the hospitals.'

'Indeed, that explains the gloomy looks Mr. Fielding has worn this long time. Still, Margaret will be rich; she will have 800*l.* from Lady Tolmaine, and her father is wealthy.'

'He is not an old man; he may marry

again, and have a second family. However my consent having been once given to this marriage, of course I should not withdraw it though the girl were stript of every penny. I only mention it to show you that Caryl's resources are not so inexhaustible as, you seem to fancy.'

'Then I must advance the money myself.'

'And how will you be repaid?'

'I don't want to be repaid; the interest will be safe, and Colin has as much claim on the little I have as if he were my own son.'

Sir Loys shook his head.

'It is not just that your little earnings and savings should be squandered by a dissipated scamp like ——'

Mabel stopped his mouth with her little hand.

'Like no one *we* love, cousin Loys. I

have faith in Colin yet. He will be all that we can wish some day. Do you think I do not know the nature of the boy I have reared from a baby? Only, don't spoil everything by reproaches; and leave Helen and him to manage their own affairs.'

'Well, well; but we won't infringe on your reserved funds yet, Mab. As you say, since I've got to do it, it may as well be done first as last. I'll have a talk with Bond and Ryder about it; but after that, Colin must keep himself as best he can; I'll do no more for him.'

Miss Marston left him with a secret smile. Her discussions with Sir Loys on this matter generally ended in this way, when as a *dernier resort* she had offered her own purse in the spendthrift's aid. Not but that she was perfectly sincere in the offer. Sir Loys would have been horrified if he

had known how often his youngest son's 'evil day' of reckoning had been staved off by the generosity of his friend Very foolish and weak it was of her no doubt, but then Collingwood *was* Mabel Marston's weakest point. She would have cheerfully given her life for Caryl, but for Collingwood she would have given an immortality, and he would have accepted the offering as carelessly as you might accept a daisy from a child, with 'there's a dear pet,' believing that by his recognition of the love that proffered the gift she would be fully satisfied and rewarded. And so she would have been. There was such a *naïveté* in Collingwood's selfishness, that his friends seldom detected and still seldomer resented it. He demanded all sacrifices from them less on the plea of his own deservings than as the natural outcomings of their affection.

You could no more be angry with him than with the exacting impulse of a baby, when it strains at an exhausted mother's breast. And the love he gave in return was so child-like, perfectly warm, perfectly sincere, but as disproportionate to that which it claimed as the baby's is when it repays the mother's self-devotion with a murmur and a smile. He had a great power of winning hearts, and so sweet is the sense of loving that those whom he attracted, in very gratitude for the instinct he had awakened in them, gave him, if not more than he 'desired,' certainly more than he 'deserved.' Caryl was universally respected and admired, but his circle of intimate friends was limited to the very few who could sympathise with the depth and earnestness of his aspirations, towards truth and love. But Colin was petted, praised, caressed by numbers of

people. Wherever he went he was called a 'darling' by the women, and 'a right good fellow' by the men. In the friendships lavished upon him, contrasted with the few that were won by his brother, he might be compared to a man whose dress is covered with spangles, beside one who in his bosom wears a priceless diamond. But Collingwood, childlike in everything but intellectual culture, preferred the glitter of a thousand spangles to the lustre of a solitary gem.

Miss Marston on quitting Sir Loys went to seek her darling in the garden, where she knew he awaited her tidings of the interview she had so successfully concluded. It was a lovely June afternoon, and Mrs. Grenfell had caused her bath-chair (which her rheumatism compelled her to use constantly as her only mode of progression through the

grounds), to be wheeled under the shade of an acacia tree on the lawn, where she sat with her knitting-work gazing complacently at an arrangement of flower-beds, that looked in the shadow, like a Kidderminster hearth-rug, and in the sunshine, like a kaleidoscope pattern. So gay it was, that the very butterflies seemed to think it 'stunning,' and reeled and staggered above it, as if the glare had given them congestion of the brain. Helen sat on the grass at her feet, winding skeins of wool for her, and every moment glancing up at Collingwood, who stood near her, with eyes that plainly expressed to all observers, that the blue sunny sky, the emerald lawn, the jewelled flower-beds, nay, even the blaze of the orange and scarlet *couvrette* that Aunt Flo was knitting for Robert Browning's counterpane, formed to her but a dim background for that radiant

shape of glory! The radiant shape himself appeared totally unconscious of this mute adoration, although he was all the while inhaling the sweet incense with the intense enjoyment of a man's insatiate vanity. Though his bright dark eyes never dwelt upon hers, his quick-flashing glances took in all her reverential homage, as a humming-bird sips all the sweetness of the blossoms over which it darts like a ray of light. He held in his hand a Greek Æschylus (he as invariably carried a book with him as some men carry umbrellas), from which he occasionally read aloud some passage in a clear sonorous voice, perfectly regardless of the improbability of his hearers' appreciation of it; and sometimes he would put the volume to a less legitimate use, by flinging it at a bird in the acacia-tree, or throwing it to Caryl's spaniel Gelert, to make him fetch

and carry. He suspended this amusement as Queen Mab approached, and turned on her a look of eager enquiry, while Gelert commenced his studies in Greek by tearing out several pages of his book. Mabel nodded and smiled.

'All right *this* time, Colin, but I've had to fight hard. We won't talk about it just now.'

'We won't talk about it at all,' said her godson, who had his own reasons for wishing to bury the subject in oblivion; 'if it's all settled, no need to bother any more about it; the governor is a brick, and you are—a—a —polished corner of the Temple! Hallo! that fellow's eating my Æschylus. Hurrah!' and snatching the book from the canine destroyer, he flung it up into the acacia tree with such energy of impulse, and such

inaccuracy of aim, that it came down with a thump upon Aunt Flo's nose.

'Now, Colin!' expostulated the mild sufferer, 'do you know a very small book will hurt when it comes down on one from such a height? He does not care! there he goes, leaping over my theoretical (query geometrical?) beds, and I declare, right over the sun-dial. What have you said to him, Mabel, to make him so wild?'

'As if he was not always wild. Florence, where is Caryl?'

'He is in his lair. Dear me! is there not a bump coming on my nose, Colin?'

'Not the least, aunt; I assure you your nose is as flat as Flanders.'

'Then it is you who have made it so,' cried Mrs. Grenfell, roused to a just resentment by this inuendo against her charms. 'What a mercy it was only your Greek

Testament; it might have been—suppose it had been Alison's History, or some book in nineteen volumes.'

'Colin,' cried Mabel, 'what is your brother doing in his lair?'

'Painting and papering it, I should not wonder—to fit it for his final retreat when his honeymoon shall be over.'

Miss Marston looked uneasy.

'What do you mean? Is there anything wrong between him and Margaret?'

'There is never anything right that I can see. I never saw such a dreary pair of lovers in my life. If that's courtship, the Lord defend me from it.' And he shot a sly glance at Helen, who blushed, she knew not why. After which, he executed another flying leap over the sun-dial, which landed him in the middle of a bed of calceolarias, to the irreparable detriment of the same.

'Helen,' said Mabel anxiously, 'is Car'l unhappy? Has Margaret vexed him in any way?'

'I am afraid,' answered Helen hesitatingly, 'that he is not quite happy; that she does vex him sometimes, for often, after they have been alone together, he seems grave and melancholy, yet when we are all with him her manner to him is just the same as usual; you know it was never very ——'

'Agreeable,' suggested Collingwood, who had returned from his acrobatic excursion. 'I would not be that girl's lover, no, not if her every hair was worth a mine of gold. Either she has not the sense to see what annoys Caryl, or she has not the sensibility to care. Yesterday evening, at Sir James Blake's, there was a barrister, Serjeant Bethell; and she would talk of nothing but trials for murder, circumstantial evidence, and so on. I expected that she would propose reading

aloud some chapters from the Newgate Calendar; and the more Caryl tried to change the conversation the more she tried to force him to take part in it. No wonder if it made him sick, and he's gone to his lair to compose himself, as Gelert there retires to his kennel when he's hurt.'

'I cannot understand,' said Miss Marston thoughtfully. 'I am afraid Margaret is a little *hard*. She views your brother's excessive sensibility as a weakness, and takes this method of overcoming it.'

'The only weakness she is likely to overcome by such a method, I should say, was his weakness for *her*! Hush! here he comes,' as Caryl descended from his ruined turret, and advanced to join the party, looking a little graver than usual, but with no other sign of discomposure. He smiled, too, as he addressed Queen Mab.

'I need not ask if your embassy to my father was successful, for I witnessed Colin's gambols from the tower window just now, and I can divine the reason of his buoyancy. I would give you joy, Colin, only you seem to have more than you know what to do with.'

'Perhaps he might spare some for *you*?' said Mabel softly; but Caryl turned away his head without reply.

'Caryl!' cried Aunt Flo piteously, 'do look at me! Is not there a blue mark on my nose?'

'No, my sweetest (from Colin), all the blue is in the heaven of your eyes!'

'The idea!' said Mrs. Grenfell, good-naturedly; but though *you* laugh at me, it is not so very long since I used to be called "Florence the Fair." Young men did not throw poetry books at my nose *then*.'

'They were more likely to write poetry books *on* it, as I will do one day,' said the graceless nephew.

'The idea! as if my face was so flat as *that*! Your dear papa, Helen, used to call me Flore—Flore—.'

'Flore Pleno, perhaps?' suggested Collingwood.

'Oh, you naughty boy; I know, from the nurseryman's lists, that "flore pleno" means a double flower. Well, I suppose I *am* double the size I used to be (pick up my crotchet needle, Nelly), and I used to be as light as a sphynx.'

'A sylph,' corrected Caryl.

'Ah well! it is all the same; look, here come Mr. and Miss Fielding.'

CHAPTER XV.

SPECULATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY.

But I, who am as a nerve, o'er which do creep
The else unfelt oppressions of the earth.

. . . . .

That thou on me,
Shouldst rain these drops of blistering agony!

SHELLEY.

'I THOUGHT I should find Sir Loys among you,' said Mr. Fielding, as he joined the group still laughing at Aunt Flo's 'idea' of identity. 'In his study is he? Would it be an intrusion my joining him there?'

'I can answer for him, that it would not,' replied Mabel, glancing slily at her godson;

'for I have just left him; he has been overlooking some unpleasant business-papers, and a change of subject would be a relief to him.'

'Then, ladies, by your leave I will commit my daughter to your care for an hour. No, Collingwood, I will not break up your party. I can find my own way.'

Margaret looked unusually bright and gay this morning, her little hat and feather so piquantly poised on the coronal of her rich hair; and the pink flush on her cheek so heightened the brilliancy of her sparkling eyes that it is no wonder her friends gazed admiringly at her—that only one among them a little distrusted the sparkle and the glow. But Miss Marston, always watchfully observant of every indication of the young girl's character, especially in its recent development, thought that the rose on her

cheek was too hectic for either bodily or mental health; that her voice rang false in its forced and hurried playfulness; that there was restless excitement in her manner, as she stood tapping the velvet sward with a foot on whose faultless boot and high-arched instep, even Collingwood the invincible gazed approvingly.

But Caryl was quite unsuspicious of anything menacing in these signs. He attributed them to a remembrance of the coldness with which he had parted from her the preceding night; and there was something deprecating in his air when he addressed her, which she was not slow to observe. She declined the garden-chair he offered her, knowing that he would take up his position either beside or behind it, and stood leaning against the bole of the acacia-tree in such a way that she faced all the group, except

Collingwood, whose impartial, if not unfriendly, glances she always instinctively avoided.

'Good people!' she cried gaily, 'I'll bet you gloves all round, that you'll none of you guess how I have been employing myself this morning!'

'Penning a confutation of Mr. Stuart Mill's defective logic, perhaps?' sneered Colin.

'Penning a love-sonnet as unlikely,' smiled Mabel.

'Some sort of millinery?' suggested Helen.

'Or pastry?' from Mrs. Grenfell.

Caryl said nothing, but in his eyes Margaret might have read the optical delusion—

'Whatever you have been doing, you have been longing for *me*?'

'All wrong,' resumed Miss Fielding,

cheerfully. 'I HAVE BEEN LOOKING AT CORPSES!'

Had a vulture suddenly swooped down on the circle from the branches above them, it would hardly have caused greater consternation than did this pleasant announcement. Collingwood's eyes remained fixed upon the speaker's face for full twenty seconds—an unusual immobility for *them*. Helen dropped the ball of wool she was winding, and stooping hurriedly for it, snatched instead at Gelert's plumy tail, and never heard him yelp; while to this day there is a stripe of green in the midst of a band of blue in Mrs. Grenfell's 'couvrette,' a memorial of her profound dismay and abstraction.

Mabel turned *her* eyes upon Caryl, and drew closer to his side, as if to shield him from some peril; while Caryl's lips quivered, and *his* eyes dropped from his lady's face to the ground.

'Yes,' continued Margaret, quite placidly, 'there are no fewer than three persons lying dead in the parish at this moment, and I have been to look at them all.'

Spake Collingwood:

'I am never surprised at any form that female eccentricity may think proper to take. This whim of your ladyship's is perhaps the initiative to a proposed study of anatomy?'

'And why "eccentricity?"' enquired Margaret. 'Are pain and sorrow "eccentric"? Is death "eccentric"? Why should we always shrink from confronting the outward forms of evil, whose forces are ceaselessly in action around us? or rather ——'

'Oh, dear, no; far be it from *me* to wish to hinder you from improving your intimacy with any of the "forms of evil," with which you may feel yourself *en rapport*. Can I be of any use to you in your researches?'

'Or rather,' she proceeded, loftily disregarding Colin's banter, 'why should we deepen the shadows around us, by connecting them with associations with which they may have nothing really in common? Why can we not look serenely, even cheerfully, upon the dead?'

'Perhaps, Miss Fielding, you will kindly choose another subject. We claim no affinity with ghouls or vampires, and therefore it has no festive associations for *us*.'

'Oh, Margaret,' cried Helen, reproachfully, 'how can you sadden all the brightness of this sunshine with the funereal darkness of the grave?'

'But why should it be dark?' persisted Margaret. 'I was thinking this morning, while I was looking at those dead people—one was a very old woman, who had died in her dotage, and one was a new-born

infant; but the other was young Phillips, the poor young man who was drowned in the river the other day ——'

Here Mabel moved suddenly, as if to interrupt her, but Caryl whispered, 'Let her go on.' So she slipped her hand in his, and stood silently looking at Margaret.

'I thought, as I stood looking at him, lying there so calm and peaceful, of the strange discovery—in photography, is it not? of the murderer's features remaining pourtrayed on the retina of the victim's eye, to take down with him into the tomb, as a lover may bear on his dead breast the portrait of his living love. If that can be, why should not the last landscape on which the dying eyes have dwelt, remain also impressed upon them, with a radiance and beauty that may lighten up the grave? It would not be dark, then, to poor Phillips, for

he went down beneath the waters on just such a sunny day as this, with the glory of blue skies, and ——'

A cry from Helen stopped her. Caryl had fainted.

Whether or not Miss Fielding repented of the experiment she had chosen to make on her lover's nerves, I think she must have regretted its publicity, when she saw how it was received by her disgusted audience. Horror stiffened Mrs. Grenfell's features into as near a resemblance to a stony 'sphynx' as they were capable of attaining; Helen hid her face in her hands, weeping; while Colin sprang past Margaret to his brother's side with an impetuosity that nearly threw her down—and he would not have cared much if it had. But, if anything could have stirred repentance in her, it would have been the look of sorrowful wondering reproach that Mabel Marston

turned on her as she bent down tenderly to raise the sufferer's head. But the swoon was only momentary, and almost before his brother reached him Caryl had recovered himself, and rose to his feet.

'It is over,' said Mabel; 'it was nothing, only the heat.'

But the young man rejected the excuse she would have framed for him, and turning full upon Margaret, he said:

'It is to be regretted, Miss Fielding, that the themes on which you have lately delighted to expatiate, can never, by any effort of reasoning, be divested of their agony for *me*. I cannot, I do not, hope that you can pardon such weakness; but, at least, I will not suffer it to be any restraint upon you.' And bowing coldly, he marched off again to the solitude of his 'lair,' as a

wounded forest-creature retreats to the deepest shelter of the covert.

Miss Fielding was struck dumb; not by Mr. Fernleigh's words, but by his manner in uttering them. The cold severity of his voice, usually so musically tender; of his eyes, which had never before rested on her but with the expression of fond devotion. Never but once had she seen him look so stern. The test she had applied almost seemed successful; could anything but remorse have awakened such profound emotion? But even as she paled at this thought, the quiet dignified sadness of his rebuke aroused in her a dim sense that in the reserve of even a guilty soul, there might be a kind of sacredness. What right had she to force confession by torture? With a soul so keenly alive to the anguish of a wounded conscience, surely his fellows might stand

aside in reverent pity, and leave their God to deal.

A deep silence fell on the party when Caryl had withdrawn, but soon Helen's instinctive politeness led her to make an effort to relieve her visitor's embarrassment, and she invited her to assist her to repair the mischief that Collingwood's gambols had caused in the calceolaria bed. Thither the girls betook themselves, followed by Queen Mab, while Colin wheeled his aunt's chair back into the house. Helen tried hard, by innocent prattle, to divert and console her friend; but she saw that though she answered lightly and cheerfully, her eyes kept filling with tears; and Mabel saw that as she stooped over the flowers, those tears dropped slowly, one by one, until the leaves and blossoms glittered as with dew; and Queen

Mab noticed this dew-fall with real satisfaction. She had time to recover herself, however, before her father made his appearance to take her home. He looked a little surprised to find that both the young men had vanished, but made no remark. He was beginning to think that 'lovers' quarrels' were growing rather too frequent between Margaret and Fernleigh, and wondered at the petulance the girl often displayed in Caryl's presence, but never towards any but him. She had never recurred to Meredith's story, and her father hoped that she had forgotten or was ashamed of the suspicion she had once expressed. He hoped that the former was the case, and was by no means wishful to revive the remembrance; so he left the young people to settle their affairs without any interference, and therein 'temporising Tom' showed more wisdom

than he sometimes displayed in the management of his own.

His conversation with Sir Loys this afternoon had been entirely satisfactory. With a seeming frankness that had quite imposed on the simple-hearted baronet, he had confessed his difficulty with Morton about the missing will, knowing that he would soon hear of it from other sources, if he had not heard it already. It is not to be supposed that he told of Morton's suspicions of his having destroyed the paper, or gave the least intimation that he knew anything of its purport. He merely suggested that his cousin's illness had enfeebled his brain, and led him to attach an absurd importance to the recovery of the portfolio, and to blame him most unjustly for having completely forgotten it, in the shock of Evans' violent death.

Sir Loys, gentle, easy-tempered, and unselfish, was already inclined to console himself for the possible disappointment of his golden dreams for his son. Although Margaret might not bring 'quite fabulous' wealth into the family, still she had a modest competence, that could not be alienated from her. She would be her father's heiress, too. Besides, the portfolio would be fished up to the surface, no doubt, by the bait of a hundred pounds reward. There was little doubt that James Meredith, or some one of his associates, had committed that murder. He had effected his escape from England, and was now 'lost to sight' (though *not* 'to memory dear') in the *noli-me-tangere* mob of ruffians at San Francesco. But doubtless he still kept up some communication with his relatives, and the bribe that Morton offered would not fail to bring to light, if not the will

itself, at least some information as to what had been done with it. Moreover, the millionaire himself was not dead yet, and might live long enough to take a more rational view of his 'legacy duties.' Threatened men live long, and threatened heirs often live to inherit. So Sir Loys patted his friend's shoulder, bade him be of good cheer, and flinging Collingwood's hateful bills into his sécrétaire, he passed his arm through Fielding's, and led him away to join the ladies on the lawn.

Of course the usual invitation to stay and dine was pressed upon the father and daughter, and resolutely declined by both; but they went home together in a very opposite frame of mind. Mr. Fielding thought *he* had done himself a great deal of good by that visit, and Margaret feared that *she* might have done herself, or others, a great deal of harm. Still,

notwithstanding her depression, her softened tears, her proud heart was yet unhumbled, and her resolve to possess herself of Caryl's secret was unaltered.

CHAPTER XVI.

COLLINGWOOD AMONG THE CRITICS.

And one old gentleman stares and stands,—
Shakes his head, and lifts his hands,
And cries, 'How very improper!'
Miss Kilmansegg and her Golden Leg.

COLLINGWOOD FERNLEIGH'S publishers had 'brought out' his new volume of poems, but from some blunder or other the copy forwarded to Sir Loys only reached him in company with the magazines, &c., that reviewed it. All the leading and influential magazines were taken in at Fernleigh Park, for the gentlemen of the family; and some

that were not influential, except on affairs of the toilet or the work-table, were taken by Helen and her step-mother. The brilliancy of Collingwood's poetical début had made 'the public' eager for his next essay, and the little circle of home admirers, never doubting of the welcome it would be sure to receive, seized upon the reviews, before they opened the Poems, that they might feast their hungry hearts on the praises so certain to be lavished on their darling. Oh! the woful disappointment! The dreary visage of blank discomfiture that each turned upon the other as she laid down the 'article,' so hopefully perused! For alas! all the reviewers, major and minor—all united in one grand chorus of severe, almost unqualified, reprobation! Among these critics were one or two who, dropping the mysterious and anonymous 'We,' stood

forth to give to the opinions they frankly expressed, the weight of well-known and distinguished names; and some of the others, although nameless to the bulk of the 'public,' were no strangers to the initiated in literary mysteries. None of these were at all unsparing of severe reproof to the young writer, whom they convicted of offending against moral purity and religious reverence. But they were mostly generous, and kindly even in their censure; keenly appreciative of the poet's genius, while they lamented its aberrations from good feeling and good taste. But among the minor critics there were too many who could not temper judgment with mercy; perhaps because indiscriminate abuse is easier than judicious praise. To listen to these (as the Americans say) was 'a caution!' If they had been compelled to

follow in the wake of their 'public,' when it cheered with enthusiastic commendation the author of 'Galathea,' they took their revenge now, by doing their best to pelt down the triumphal arch they had assisted to erect for him. Even his classical learning was now found to be 'superficial,' his pathos was false, his originality was affectation, his versification was trick and parody! His very youth was flung at him as a taunt, instead of pleaded as a palliation, as if the poetic faculty should dare no utterance until the brain wax feeble and the pulse beat slow, as if the poet's vision cannot hope to be clear until his bodily eyes are dim with years—and spectacles!

The dreadful blow fell first upon the ladies of the family. While they were eagerly turning over the reviews, in hope of at length lighting upon some more favourable

verdict, Sir Loys had walked off with the book itself to his own study, where he lay, stretched on his easy chair, looking over it, with an expression of countenance in which parental pride gradually became blended with a puzzled bewildered dismay, very curious to behold. He was still thus engaged when Caryl, who had been out with his brother to spend a few days with some friends, in the adjoining county, having returned from his excursion, entered the study to report himself to his father—a token of respect not always considered necessary in these days of relaxed discipline, and one which Collingwood neglected unblamed. But Caryl's standard of good breeding was a high one, and he was as much the gentleman in the familiarity of his domestic circle as among those to whom the customs of society exacted courteous

observance. But for once, Sir Loys scarcely noticed his son's affectionate greeting, and the young man's eyes rested on the book he was absorbed in, with curiosity and interest.

'I disturb you, sir,' he said. 'I see Colin's new work is come. That is not the only copy sent us?'

'It is the only copy come down. I hope we may not have cause to wish it were the only copy printed.'

Caryl looked startled, and drew nearer to his father's chair.

'Perhaps,' continued the baronet, 'I have some old-fashioned prejudices, from which it is right that younger men should be free? Judge for yourself, Car'l, my boy.' He held the book towards him as he spoke, laying his finger on the passage he had been reading.

'Rather, rather warm, eh?' he asked.

His son advanced eagerly to take the volume, but as he glanced at the verses pointed out to him, a look of disapproval shadowed his face, which deepened, as he turned over the pages, into grave displeasure.

'We have only this copy you say, sir? I should scarcely like to see it in Helen's hands.'

'Just so. I am very sorry that Collingwood should have published what is unfit for a modest woman's eyes. Take it to your own room, Car'l. I have seen enough of it for the present; take your time to look over it and send me the reviews. I want to see what they say.'

Caryl obeyed, but in the breakfast-room he found the young author, lounging on the sofa; the 'Magas' strewed all around him, as he had caught them up, one after another, and flung them down upon the floor.

'Ho! Car'l, old fellow!' he cried, in great glee; 'do come and see how I'm "cut up;" it's the finest fun in life.'

'No more than you deserve,' replied his brother indignantly; 'how dare you bring into English homes a book that can be placed in no woman's hands?'

'Who the deuce cares to write for women?' scoffed Collingwood; 'I write for scholars, for men of letters, not for a pack of girls; not but what the girls *will* get hold of my book, of course; all the sooner for the hue and cry set up against it. I do believe that half of these very critiques have been written by *old* girls! There is a venomous spitefulness about some of them that smacks rather of the *goose* than the *gander*-quill! It will be run after by all the ladies, you'll see!'

'You are mistaken, Colin; not all your gifts of music, of passion, of pathos—not all

your brilliant imagery, or rhythmic grace, will ever gain acceptance for *that* book at any English fireside. The writings of Ovid and Catullus may still be the permitted class-books of a youth which is vowed from infancy to the service of Him who is infinitely Pure and Holy; but works written on their model will never be welcomed in our domestic circles, nor suffered to pollute the minds of our sisters and wives.'

'You were always such a he-prude, Car'l; can you make no allowance for the privilege of art?'

'For her privilege, yes; but not for her license.'

'Her privileges will be narrowed indeed, if *you* are to define them! When we were boys at Florence, how you were laughed at for your virtuous horror at Hal Fleming's

undraped statues, when you knew he had always living models! You said then ——'

'What I say still,' rejoined Caryl stoutly, 'that the loftiest triumphs of art are too dearly purchased by the degradation of a human soul.'

'You belong to the school of which Mabel's favourite sings :—

> Some filthy saint rebuked the gust
> With which he chanced to get a sight
> Of some dear naked Aphrodite.
> He glanced a thought above the toes of,
> By breaking zealously her nose off.

Caryl could not help laughing, and Colin, who always reckoned a smile as a triumph, made his escape beyond hearing of any renewed remonstrance.

In fact, the castigation of the reviewers was borne by the delinquent with an insouciance that it would have astonished them to witness. The kindly admonitions of the men who held

high rank in the world of letters, were received rather with pride than with humiliation. His vanity was more flattered by their notice than wounded by their reproof. As for the small fry, he laughed at their virulence; he mocked at their inconsistency, and ridiculed their blunders. He criticised his critics, and declared he would review his reviewers. But they were too strong for him this time, and Messrs Waller and Wilmot withdrew the Poems from publication.

When this intelligence reached Fernleigh Park, Sir Loys' discomfiture was even greater than when he had added up the sum total of his youngest son's college bills.

'Good heavens!' he cried, to Caryl, 'the boy has ruined himself! *He* a divinity student! With what face can I ever present him to the living of Stanage, when he is known everywhere as the author of a work

brother is to me—I have hitherto failed to recognise as characteristics of *his*.'

'I think,' answered Mabel, 'that you share a common misconception of a poet's temperament and office. It is not his "individual emotions," however "splendid," that he is wanted to reveal. When he does so he is shunned as an egotist, or ridiculed as an enthusiast; the heart of his listeners must beat *with* and not *for* him. He expresses for them the sentiment, the passion, the yearning, for which their consciousness has hitherto found no utterance. He but strikes for them the keynote of the inner harmony, which is latent in all;—as the prophet interprets the vision, as the priest offers the prayer.

'But,' objected Caryl, 'does not this presuppose the power of sympathy, the deep and earnest feeling,—the absence of which so perplexes me in Collingwood?'

'It may seem so; yet to me it is evident that what is called poetic insight is a power not of *reflecting*, but of *discovering*, the most subtle and delicate shades of feeling in others, of which the poet's personal experience may be a blank. Here, for instance (taking a volume from the table), is a poem by a young author who has been as severely censured as our Collingwood, and for the same faults,' and she read from 'Itylus':—

> Oh! sister, sister, thy first-begotten!
> *The hands that cling, the feet that follow*——

'The exquisite tenderness and pathos of that line can only be fully appreciated by a woman, perhaps only by a mother; yet it is written by a man, and so young a man that the feeling it expresses can scarcely be familiar to his individual experience. Indeed, when these youthful writers attempt to depict their own strictly individual emo-

tions, the abuse of poetic art is avenged by the absence of poetic taste; then there is coarseness mistaken for vigour, and glare mistaken for glow.'

'That line you admire so,' observed Collingwood, who had re-entered while Mabel was reading, 'was doubtless suggested by the necessity of finding a rhyme for "swallow."'

He said this to provoke Miss Marston, and succeeded. She turned upon him fiercely:

'And if so, it is the apter illustration of my thought. The poet's *ear* recognises the melody of the rhyme, as his *feeling* recognises the truth and fitness of the allusion suggested by it. Collingwood! *You're a pig!*'

With which characteristic, but astounding peroration, Mabel concluded her essay on —and to—poets!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GHOST IN THE COPPICE.

And haunted pits the rustic hurries by;
Where cold wet ghosts sit ringing jingling bells.
P. J. Bailey.

Miss Marston was sitting in her parlour, and Robert Browning was sitting on her knee, when Collingwood leapt in at the open window, bearing on the end of his stick something that looked like a crow's nest with a poppy in it.

'Behold,' he cried, 'a weed that I have gathered in the wood, which it would puzzle even a botanist like Car'l to classify.'

'What on earth is it? it bears some faint resemblance to—a cap.'

'Then is it a species of *caul*-iflower. It is, I suspect, a petal fallen from that choice blossom of handmaidens, your Georgie. I fished it out of a puddle.'

'What was it doing there, I wonder?'

'It was bathing, probably, to refresh itself after its too long term of service.'

'My wonder is,' said Mabel, contemplatively surveying the tawdry bedraggled trophy that Colin had considerately deposited on the head of her marble Silence—'My wonder is that she could ever have carried it so far as the wood; it's a mystery to me how servants contrive to keep those fly-away things on their heads.'

'By *cap*-illary attraction, I suppose,' answered her incorrigible godson, 'but I should have thought that a cap was as

secure upon Georgie's frizzly *chevelure*, as if it were stuck on a gorse-bush.'

Miss Marston rang the bell. 'The Gorgon' responded to the summons, brandishing a hot iron in either hand, but paused on the threshold, with a cry of dismay, on perceiving her deteriorated headdress.

'My goodness! Mr. Collingwood! my best Sunday cap all draggled! Wherever did you find it?'

'Wherever did you lose it?' enquired her mistress. 'Mr. Collingwood found it in the wood. How came it there?'

But Georgie was no wise daunted.

'Jane Boucher came last night, ma'am, for some honey for her mother, and it got dark, and she begged me to "send" her a bit of the way home, through the wood, because she was afraid of the ghost.'

'Of the *what*?'

'Of the ghost, ma'am—Mr. Fielding's young gentleman's ghost, as has taken to walking lately—so I went with her, and when I turned back I got scared, all alone, and I scuttered home, and my cap fell off, and I was feared to go back and look for it; oh, dear! it's ruined!'

'Serve you right, for being such a goose as to be frightened at nothing.'

'But it ain't nothing,' replied Georgie, resolutely, 'it's really the poor young gentleman as walks every night regular, round about where he was murdered. Tom Jordan has seen him, and Mrs. Grenfell's maid was going home on Wednesday night, late from the Manor House, with Mr. Fielding's gentleman ——'

'With the ghost, do you mean? Was she walking with *him*?'

'Oh, Lord no, ma'am; Mr. Fielding's

vally, I mean. And they *both* saw it, all gliding in a grey shroud—and Mrs. Probert, she's been ill ever since, and Mr. Bennett (the vally, ma'am) had to carry her home in his harms, as fast as his legs could carry *him*, and he was all in a quiver ——'

'There, that's enough of such nonsense; your irons are cooling; go away, and shut the door,' which Georgie did with a bang, being offended at being thus cut short in the middle of her supernatural narrative.

Miss Marston turned to her godson.

'What does all this mean, Colin?'

'Only the old story, godma.' Common people always raise a ghost where a murder has been done; I wonder this tale has not been invented sooner.'

'But was Bennett really frightened?'

'Fear is contagious, you know; Probert was so terrified at a white cat, or something,

that she fainted away in his *h*arms, and he had to carry her to the Park. By Jove; if I had to carry plump Jenny Probert half-a-mile I believe *my* nerves would be rather shaky; I am sure my *muscles* would.'

'This must be stopped,' said Mabel, looking grave; 'it would be very painful to the Fieldings to have such a melancholy subject revived in this manner. People don't like to hear that their dead friends are walking about their pleasure-grounds.'

'Oh, Margaret would not mind such a trifle; indeed, I think she would rather like it—it would be so nice to worry Caryl with it! As for old Fielding, he is likely soon to be on an equal footing with ghosts, whether they walk, lie still, or run.'

'He looks very ill; he is worried, I believe, about the quarrel he has had with his cousin, Mr. Morton.'

'They say Morton is very ill, too; it will be a race between them. However, if Fielding dies, *his* fortune will be safe for Margaret! so she will be well off, even though Morton should disinherit her. I wonder what he and Fielding quarrelled about?'

'Don't you know? Mr. Fielding told Sir Loys. It was about a portfolio containing some papers of Morton's that has been missing since Evans' death, and the millionaire blames his cousin for not having recovered it.'

'What an unreasonable old muff he must be! But they say he's not all right in the head. Anyhow, Fielding seems breaking up fast. He goes to bed often at twilight now; perhaps *he* is afraid of the ghost. I say, Mabel, I have got something—not spiritual, but animal—in my pocket for you.' And

Collingwood produced from his pocket some live creature, tied up in his pocket-handkerchief.

Mabel was on her tip-toes in a moment, trying to peer at the treasure, which he held above her reach.

'What is it, Colin, a squirrel? Do give it me!'

He gradually lowered the prize, laughing at her child-like curiosity, and she snatched it eagerly from his hands.

'A live guinea-pig! the little wretch! take it away; I won't have it. I hate things that eat cabbages.'

'And I thought you would be so glad of it—you who are so fond of pets! I bought it from a boy in the village, who was ill-using it. Have you the heart to refuse it? Look at it, plaintively wagging its little tail!'

'Its tail? it has got none; a hideous little beast, it ought to be ashamed of itself.'

'I don't see why it should be ashamed of a deficiency which it shares in common with ——'

'Don't be coarse, sir.'

'Of course not, ma'am. At least, it does not try to conceal its deficiency beneath garments that might cover the coils of the sea-serpent. However, since you scorn my little friend merely because he is no *tail-bearer*, I'll present him to Robert Browning here.'

'Oh, you savage!' and Mabel made a snatch at the creature, which slipped from her hands to the floor.

In a moment the cat sprang upon his prey. Collingwood flew to the rescue—but, alas! too late; the shock had been too much for the guinea-pig's nervous system, and it expired in his grasp.

'There is an end to all things,' observed the youth, with more truth than originality, and he laid the body of the victim upon the ample bosom of the statue, where the drops from her bemired headdress trickled down on it like muddy tears.

'That,' said Mabel, 'is the third innocent that the cruel wretch has slain on my very hearthstone; and he never looks back with a moment's regret!'

'The fat old egotist! he'll leave his best hindleg in the keeper's trap one day, and I'll warrant him he'll look back with regret often enough *then*. Look, Mab, here come Car'l and Margaret, and very glum they both look; I should not be surprised if one or both of them repents their bargain. "Happy's the wooing ——"' But his quotation was cut short by the entrance of the affianced pair.

Miss Fielding's attention was at once attracted by the statue's unstatuesque adornment, and she went up to examine it.

'I should know,' she said, 'that Collingwood had been here, Miss Marston, by his treatment of your goddess, as Mrs. Grenfell calls her, but what is this? (taking up the dead animal) what murder has been committed here?'

'It was Robert Browning killed it, mistaking it, I fancy, for a rat.'

'Here's a wound in its white throat; look, Caryl, at—

Its silver skin, laced with the golden blood.'

But Caryl turned away in disgust.

'Put it down, Margaret. I do not like to see you handling such things. See, there is blood on your glove'—and he shuddered.

'Do you not know, Miss Fielding,' said

Collingwood, 'that my brother has a horror of life extinguished, in any form? If he were consistent, which nobody is, he would be a vegetarian.'

'Even then,' laughed Mabel, 'he might have to eat caterpillars; Georgie often serves them up in my vegetables.'

'No,' said Margaret, 'people are never consistent; was there not once a murderer—Eugene Aram, I think it was—who used to turn aside to avoid treading on a worm?'

Collingwood took the guinea-pig from her.

'Listen,' he cried, 'to a brief funeral oration. This unfortunate belongs to a tribe remarkable for their loquacity, for always chattering (like women) *about things that they do not understand.* Behold it now in the lap of Silence! forbidden even to declare, with the ghost of the royal Dane, that it "can a *tail* unfold!"' And in the laugh that

rewarded this sally, Collingwood slipped the corpse into his pocket.

'After all, Miss Marston,' said Margaret, 'it is not so difficult as you pretend to affront the imperturbable Mr. Fernleigh. That black look he gave me just now is the second with which he has honoured me since we left the Manor House.'

'He does not look very happy. How has this wayward girl vexed you, Caryl, dear?'

'She has not vexed me,' answered Caryl, in his calm low tones, and he smiled a little sadly at his "promise." No, Margaret, yours is only the triumph—if it be one—of embittering a happy hour by forcing on it a train of melancholy thought.'

Margaret was evidently in a perverse frame of mind this morning, for she seemed quite unmoved by her lover's gentle reproach. She resumed:

'I have been trying to persuade him to investigate this story about a ghost, that is circulating in the village and in the servants' hall.'

'*Whose* ghost?' asked Mabel, and Caryl suddenly lifted his eyes to Margaret's with a look of indescribable pain and anxiety.

She was disconcerted, though she tried to answer carelessly:

'Oh, poor Willoughby Evans, you know; it would be very trying to papa in his delicate state of health to hear such a report—and it may be true!'

'*True*?' echoed Mabel, amazedly.

Collingwood whistled softly to himself, and shot a keen glance at the speaker. Caryl did not look up.

'You think that is a silly suggestion?' continued the young lady, 'but I really think this is a case in which a spirit might

very conceivably be permitted to appear—to denounce his murderer, for instance, or ——'

'My dear Margaret,' interposed Mabel, 'I do not wonder that Caryl is annoyed or hurt, if this is the style of conversation with which you have been entertaining him. As for ghosts, from their Silent Land one only voice has reached us, pealing forth words of hope and comfort, not of accusation or reproach. "I (He says) am the Resurrection and the Life. *I* am He that liveth, and was dead, and am alive for evermore."'

Margaret was awed and silenced. Caryl rose, kissed the hand of the elder lady, bowed coldly to Miss Fielding, and followed by his brother, quitted the room. For a while neither Mabel nor her visitor spoke a word. The flush of excitement had faded from Margaret's cheek, leaving it a little paler than before, and she sat with her eyes

fixed upon the cat, absently smoothing his silky fur, and that contraction on her brow that her friend had noticed there too often of late, though it seemed less the expression of fretfulness than of subdued suffering. She appeared unconscious of Mabel's silent scrutiny, or indifferent to it; and so absorbed in her own reflections, that she looked up with a start when she said:

'My dear, please to rub Robert the *right way*, or he'll bite you. With Robert, as with others of his sex, there is always some danger in rubbing him against the grain.'

'No danger,' smiled Margaret, 'he will not bite *me*; he is not treacherous.'

'You may presume too far on his love for you; he may think the treachery is *yours*, who abuse the power that it has given you over him.'

'Drop the parable, dear,' said Margaret,

still smiling, 'and scold me to your heart's content.'

'I would *warn*, not *scold* you. I warn you that you are weakening your great power over Caryl's affections by a childish and capricious exercise of it. It is no light provocation that would bring such a cloud on your lover's brow as I have seen there to-day. Take care Margaret,—take care! The silken cord by which you hold a most true and loyal heart, is strong as a chain of steel, but when once frayed it breaks.'

'If it be worth holding,'—said Margaret, and stopped.

Mabel's wrath blazed out at once, red and fiery.

'*If* it is worth? Miss Fielding, you can say *that*! *I* must say then, and with no "if" in the case, that the unworthiness ——'

'Lies in me,' suggested Margaret, quietly,

for her passionate little hostess had paused, rather ashamed of her *emportement.* 'You are dreadfully angry with me, dear Miss Marston, and so, I could see, was Collingwood. I am in such disgrace with you all, and for what? for merely trying to persuade Caryl to overcome what you must admit to be his weakness?'

'A physical weakness, yes. But you must take Caryl's merits with their corresponding defects. You affect to glory in intellect; it is rarely that the greatest physical vigour coexists with the highest mental culture; and still more rarely that a tenderness of sympathy so exquisite as your lover's has not been learnt by a keen—too keen—sensibility. You, above all others, should respect this excessive sensibility; and it shocks me to see you paining him in mere wantonness, as a boy tortures a cockchafer, to hear it buzz. You do

not err in believing that for the woman he loves—and who loves him—Caryl would suffer all, and more than all, that it is in your power to inflict upon him; but only for *your love's* sake will he bear it. Let him once doubt that, and your power over him is gone for ever. He will never submit to be the plaything of an aimless and selfish coquetry.'

Margaret was stung to the quick. She rose, letting fall the cat from her lap with a precipitancy of descent which at any other time would have aroused his fond mistress's alarm, but she took no notice of it *now*, as the girl came and seated herself on the footstool at her feet (a moderate-sized stool would have space enough for four such feet as Mabel's).

'If,' said Margaret, looking wistfully in her face; 'if I seem cruel to Caryl, it is not

that I am trifling with him for the amusement of my own vanity, but that our relations may be settled on a securer basis than ——'

'I do not understand you, Margaret; on what surer basis can any human relations be founded than on mutual trust or mutual forbearance? But your feeling is that of mere idle curiosity, excited by the apparent inconsistency in your lover's character; and in your ignorant self-sufficiency you fancy you can sound the depths of a nature which your own may be too superficial to sympathise with. Again, I warn you that you may be acting the part of the child who breaks his toy to see where its music comes from.'

'Or like Bluebeard's wife,' smiled Margaret, 'who would, at *no risk*, have a chamber locked from her in her husband's house.'

'There is a locked chamber in every heart,' answered Mabel; 'but true affection respects the silence which is only vocal to God.'

'But you know, Mrs. Bluebeard unlocked *her* chamber, and found the silence *there* was that of *crime*.'

There! it was out at last; and Margaret was shocked and terrified at her own words. The dark suspicion that had lain so long coiling, like a venomous serpent, around her womanly instincts and affections, until they were slowly perishing in its hateful folds—how hideous it looked, brought thus into the light of day. How would Mabel, in her undoubting love and loyalty, recoil from its loathsome aspect, and scorn her for having cherished it. But that fear at least was groundless. Miss Marston would as soon have dreamt of connecting

the thought of Margaret herself with immodesty, as that of Caryl with crime. So she replied quite calmly:

'Even in that extreme case, my dear, my moral holds good. If Mrs. Bluebeard had repressed her curiosity, she might have reformed her husband, instead of destroying him.'

Again a silence. The cat had climbed back into Miss Fielding's lap, and she sat absently stroking him (the right way this time), with that ominous contraction between her eyebrows which, if she indulges in it much longer, will spoil a pretty forehead. Suddenly she lifted her bright clear eyes and said:

'Miss Marston, why is there a secret in Caryl Fernleigh's life that I alone of his friends am forbidden to know?'

'There is no secret in a life so pure as

Caryl's; but there may be a reserve. If it is a reserve from *you*, Margaret, it is because it is a sorrowful one, which can bear none but tender and pitying eyes, and you are as yet too *hard*. There are sad memories, which can only be alluded to in hours of the closest and tenderest confidence; it must be your own fault, Margaret, if there have been no such hours between Caryl and you.'

'Of course it is my own fault,' she answered with unusual petulance, 'there never can be any blame attached to either Caryl or Collingwood in *your* eyes. You are a regular partisan, Miss Marston—and you will not tell me this secret, or this reserve as you call it?'

'No, my love, not to-day; but I will tell you instead the story of my own life's sorrow—it will do you more good, perhaps, just now.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

MABEL'S LIFE-STORY.

Sad as remembered kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned
On lips that are for others,—deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret.
Oh, death in life, the days that are no more!

TENNYSON.

'FIRST of all I must show you a picture.'

Margaret's eyes turned involuntarily to the veiled portrait over the chimney-piece, but Mabel shook her head.

'No, not *that* one. I am going to speak of subjects rather incongruous with grey hair

and wrinkled brows, so I must bring myself before you as I *was*, and you must not look at me as I *am*.'

She rose, and going to her writing-table, took from a secret drawer in it a small miniature case, which she opened and placed in Miss Fielding's hands, who uttered a cry of admiration.

'Oh! dear Miss Marston! how exquisitely lovely.'

It was indeed most lovely. It was the half-length portrait of a girl of about nineteen or twenty; the mignonne figure was perfect in its fairy-like symmetry. But the face was more perfect still, with its delicacy of form, its softness of colouring, the fair bright hair brushed, as it were, impatiently, from the pure transparent brow; the large deep violet eyes, gazing forth into yours with a passionate earnestness that

would have been too like sadness, but for the sly mischief that played round the exquisitely curved lips, that laughed in arch dimples on cheek and chin. The painter had skilfully caught the spirit of that charming countenance, the wild abandon of innocent gaiety, chastened yet not subdued by a higher—though as yet latent—capacity for serious thought and feeling, that gave a strange fascination to its beauty.

Margaret gazed upon it, entranced; then with the naïvété of true girlish insolence, she exclaimed:

'Oh, Miss Marston! were you ever like this?'

'I was like that—let me see, yes, twenty-seven years ago. I was twenty-five then.'

'Twenty-five? This looks like a girl of eighteen.'

'I did not look much more then, but I have paid up those arrears of youthful looks,

for now that I am fifty-two I am sometimes taken for sixty.'

But to this Margaret made no answer. Indeed, to her mind the difference between a woman of forty and a woman of sixty was scarcely more noticeable than the difference between a flower that faded yesterday and one that withered three days ago.

Miss Marston put her arm round her neck, and drew her head gently down upon her knee.

'Look no longer on my face, Margaret, but keep your eyes fixed on what was my "counterfeit presentment." I want to speak to a young girl of the folly and the suffering of a girl like herself.'

'Folly?' repeated Margaret, 'I have heard of some suffering. Caryl and Helen have alluded to *that*, but they have never spoken of any folly of *yours*.'

'Because, even to them I have never told it. I am going to tell it you, in the hope that you may profit somewhat from an experience which came too late for *me*. Caryl has told you that his mother, Lady Fernleigh, was the sister, the half-sister only, of one who should have been *all* to me?'

'He told me that you had been his father's ward, and that you were once engaged to his uncle. Captain Trevor, I think, was the name.'

'Yes, I was engaged to him for six years; long before Sir Loys married his sister, who was many years younger than either her half-brother or her husband. Our marriage was delayed so long, by my lover's reluctance to subject me to a life of poverty and privation. I had no fortune, except the pension allotted to the daughters of officers. I was an orphan, and resided

with a relative of my father's at Slatemouth. Trevor only waited for promotion, to end our long suspense; but it did not press heavily on me, for I loved him, and was sure of his love and constancy. So sure, that I delighted to show my power over him, by a thousand little exactions and tyrannies. Girls will act so; will they not, Margaret?'

Margaret made no reply.

'Edward Trevor was not more perfect than other men, not by any means so perfect in temper as Caryl Fernleigh is. He was a little imperious—as sailors are apt to be. What is that you say? You wish Caryl were more imperious. Well, *I* wished that Trevor were more submissive; and, in one respect, more indulgent. I was vain of my beauty, vain of my wit; I was proud of the admiration these everywhere excited, and I wanted my lover

to be proud of it too; for, to do myself justice, I was willing to lay my laurels at his feet, and to shine for *his* glory, if only he would let me shine. But on this point Trevor was inexorable. He was so faithful, so single-minded, in his devotion to me, that he could not understand how I could derive a moment's pleasure from any lighter homage. Perhaps he did not make all the allowance he should have made, for the irrepressible buoyancy of a temperament which was then too quick to receive, too eager to seek, every mirthful and joyous impression. It was his *one* fault, but I was intolerant of that *one*. If he exacted too much in requiring of me a reticence, a self-control of which my nature was incapable, I was as unreasonable in demanding, as the price of my deep and true love for him, the sacrifice of tastes, feelings, and prejudices, which were as much

a part of his graver nature as wild spirits and reckless gaiety *then* were of mine. Youth's love is always selfish. Only in later years do we learn that love—for love's sake—is so precious and rare a thing that it is worth all, and more than all, we can ever give for it.'

She paused as if expecting an answer; but Margaret made none. A year ago she would have indignantly protested against what she would have called a humiliating, romantic, *servile* conception of love. How was it, that *now* her only answer was a sigh?

'Day after day I irritated these feelings and prejudices of my lover's; day after day witnessed some expression of resentment on his part, resented by me in my turn, till the bond that had held through years of trial—that should have held through life—was fretted and frayed till it broke. Among many

whom I had attracted, was the Colonel of the regiment then stationed at Slatemouth. The attentions he chose to pay me were so marked that they would not unnaturally have displeased Trevor from any one, but they were especially offensive to him because of the character Colonel Elliott bore, and I believe deserved, of being too successful among women, and too boastful of such success. A ball was to be given to the ladies of Slatemouth by the —th regiment, at which of course the Colonel would be the chief entertainer; and he made no secret that he destined all the honours of the fête for *me*. Trevor's request—almost *command*—was that I should decline the invitation; and I as peremptorily refused his request. Not that I really cared about the ball. I would willingly have sacrificed the pleasure of flattered vanity to a loving prayer of Edward's, but

his tone provoked and irritated me; and after a stormy scene of taunts and reproaches the long-fretted cord gave way. He gave me back my plighted troth, announced my freedom, and his own—and so we parted. Yet I never believed that I had really lost him. I fancied it was in my power at any moment to recall him, and I fully intended to recall him, but I would show my independence first; and when I had sufficiently punished him I would whistle him back to my feet, and prove my magnanimity by paining him no more.

'There were yet three weeks to elapse before that fatal ball, which was to be—I resolved—the last scene of my self-assertion; but in less than three weeks the whisper had gone abroad that my engagement was broken off. Soon it was no secret anywhere, and I found myself the object of a curiosity hard to bear, and of a pity harder

still. But I was only piqued by it to an affectation of indifference that I was very far from feeling, and so I went to that ball.'

Here she made so long a pause that Margaret glanced up from the miniature she still held, half fancying that her friend meant to end her narrative there. Miss Marston's eyes were fixed dreamily on some imaginary figure in the distance, and her hearer was a little surprised when she resumed:

'I wore a pink gauze dress over white satin that night; it had little ruches round the hem, and a long sash edged with ruches. I had a wreath of white jessamine, real cape jessamine, in my long ringlets. The scent of jessamine always brings back to me that night—it was the last ball-dress I ever wore.'

She kept silence for some moments, still looking on that vision of memory in its gay toilette. Then she began again:

'They said I looked perfectly lovely; I thought so myself as I contemplated my image in the glass—quite a little fairy queen I looked. And I did *so* wish that Trevor could see me; I had not seen him for three weeks. If he had come to me then, I think I would have given up the ball, and rested content with *one* admirer. And he *did* see me!

'The ball was held in the Town-hall of Slatemouth; the approach was crowded with people waiting to catch a glimpse of the ladies' toilettes as they descended from their carriages. The wind had been blowing hard all day, and was rising to a terrific gale. As I stepped along the lines of spectators, a gust caught the end of my light sash and entangled it in the boat-cloak of a gentleman who was standing in the crowd. He tried very awkwardly, as I

thought, to disengage himself; and turning impatiently towards him, I saw the lamp-light falling full upon the face of—my lost lover. One moment our eyes met, then I passed on. Even to this day I sit sometimes for hours brooding over that look, wondering if his presence there was intentional or casual only, whether in that brief glance there was any recognition of the love that, through all my folly and madness, still sealed me his—his alone! I know that I shall always brood over that question until all doubts are put to rest for ever with the aching heart they harass.

'A heart can ache a whole lifetime, Margaret, with such a trifling doubt as *that*.

'But I entered the ball-room radiant with exultation. I was so sure he could not long rebel against me; I even fancied he might be lurking in some corner furtively watching my

triumph.—And so, perhaps, he was, before the ball was over; we kept it up late that night.

'Of course, Colonel Elliott was most devoted; the ladies were envious, and some of them were very severe upon the levity which had dissolved so long an engagement with a man so deservedly respected as Edward Trevor. I overheard some remarks of the kind, but what cared I? I was the belle of the evening. I laughed, and chatted, and sparkled; I was so airy, so gay, I danced till I was footsore.

'The wind howled and raged, but the music of the band drowned it; it drowned, too, the muffled boom of the signal-guns that pealed from a ship that was wrecked upon the harbour-bar; at least, the ladies did not hear it, though some of the gentlemen—naval officers, chiefly—left the room rather hurriedly; but I—I danced on

until grey morning dawned. (She spoke rapidly now.) I was taking off my pink dress, and laying my white wreath aside, when someone told me: "The ship Argemone had been firing distress guns on the rock, and the life-boat, with Edward Trevor at the helm, put out to help her. But the ship went down, with every soul on board, and the life-boat and her gallant crew perished among the breakers." And so, while I was dancing, and smiling, and sparkling—so he died.'

Margaret was horror-struck.

'Oh, Miss Marston,' she whispered, 'I almost wonder that you could ever be gay again.'

Mabel smiled gravely, and pressed back the girl's head upon her knee. She did not care that any eyes should rest on hers, while she spoke of that dreadful time.

'It was years,' she answered, 'yes, *years* before I smiled again, or received, but with fretful impatience, the sympathy of those who would have wept with me. I was as selfish in my sorrow as I had been in my love. For years I pined in an unnatural seclusion, refusing the society of friend or relative, brooding ever on bitter memories and passionate self-reproach. When I emerged from that retirement, youth had fleeted, beauty had faded, and health was deeply, though, thank God, not irreparably impaired. No one could recognise in the sallow, withered, silver-haired invalid any trace of the brilliant loveliness that portrait represents. And what was it, Margaret, think you, that aroused me from the morbid retrospection which, if much longer indulged in, would have wrinkled my *soul* not less than my face? What was it that awoke

my heart from the benumbing torpor that would soon have rendered it incapable of healthy action? It was the cry of an infant, of a new-born, yet motherless child.'

'Collingwood Fernleigh?'

'Yes, my godson Collingwood. His mother died two days after his birth, entreating me, for the love of her, for the love of *him* who had been so dear to us both, to do all in my power to supply her place to the orphans she entrusted to my care. The piteous appeal from one who had always shown me a sister's tenderness and forbearance, reached my heart through all its lethargy. I gave her the promise she asked, and found my consolation in fulfilling it.'

'Did you live here, then?'

'No; on Lady Fernleigh's death Sir Loys let the Park for eighteen years; and his sister Florence and I accompanied him with

the children to Germany. I lived with them until Florence married Mr. Grenfell; and when they returned to England Sir Loys had this cottage altered for me, that I might still be near him.'

'And you were happy at last, Miss Marston?'

'Quite. I found my happiness in supplying a mother's place, fulfilling a mother's duties, to those dear boys. God has taught me, that our eternal reunion with those whom we have loved and lost, must be sought *here*, in faithful service to Him in whom alone all true union subsists, on either side the grave; and that a noble death is best mourned, best honoured, by a worthy life.'

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